

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 13, 2008**

JESUS: THE GOOD SHEPHERD

John 10:11-18

In Boston, Massachusetts there is a place called the Granary Burial Ground, with the grave of Elizabeth Foster Goose, believed by some to be the writer of nursery rhymes. There is one that goes like this:

Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn.
The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn.
Where is the boy that looks after the sheep?
"He's under the haystack, fast asleep."
Will you wake him? "No, not I;
For if I do, he'll be sure to cry."

Maybe you can picture this scene: A mountain of hay stacked neatly in the field, and a little boy, with a broad-brimmed hat dozing off without a care in the world; livestock wandering all over the place, getting lost or getting into trouble. All because no one is looking out for them!

Compare that picture with the scene in John 10. Jesus says He is the good shepherd, the kind who knows and cares for his sheep, who is willing to lay down his life for them. Unlike the Mother Goose rhyme, His sheep are not scattered in the meadow and He cannot be found asleep under the haystack. Let's look at what He meant by the Good Shepherd.

JESUS IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Last week we saw in verses 1-10 that Jesus claimed to be the gate or door for the sheep, the only way to abundant life. He made this claim while talking to a group of Pharisees. They were upset because Jesus restored the man's sight and he later became a follower of Christ. The blind man was one of the lost sheep of Israel and the Lord used the occasion to teach him, the Pharisees, and us, how the Good Shepherd rescues His sheep.

Jesus says: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

This is another one of those "I am" sayings like we have been looking at over the past few weeks. Eight times in the Gospel of John, Jesus uses this expression, "I am." To Jewish ears it meant only one thing – that He thought Himself to be God. The way that Jesus said "I am the Good Shepherd" in this verse He alluded to the divine name Yahweh or Jehovah. His listeners knew without a doubt that Jesus was claiming to be the promised Shepherd King of Israel.

He stepped up to fulfill Old Testament prophecies such as Isaiah 40:10-11:

See, the Sovereign LORD [that's the word Yahweh] comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

And again in Ezekiel 34:11-12.

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says [again, Yahweh]: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

When Jesus claimed to be the Good Shepherd, they knew exactly what He meant. He claimed to be the Messiah, the Shepherd of Israel.

To make His point clear, He contrasts Himself with false teachers, especially the hard-hearted Pharisees. He compares the good shepherd with those who watch the sheep for hire:

“He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”

Philip Keller, who was a shepherd, wrote several books about his experiences with sheep. In one, he remembers being the shepherd of his first flock:

They belonged to me only by virtue of the fact that I paid hard cash for them. It was money earned by the blood and sweat and tears drawn from my own body during the desperate grinding years of the Great Depression. And when I bought that first small flock I was buying them literally with my own body which had been laid down with this day in mind. Because of this I felt in a special way that they were in very truth a part of me – and I a part of them.... This made those thirty lambs exceedingly precious to me.

But this is not at all how a hired hand feels about the flock. The sheep are not precious to him. Keller remembers a ranch operated by a hired hand. “He ought never to have been allowed to keep sheep. His livestock were always thin, weak and riddled with disease or parasites.”

The reason? Hired hands – false teachers – have no personal interest in the sheep. When the work is hard, when danger or trouble comes, they are nowhere around... because they care nothing for the sheep.

But the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep he knows. He is a true shepherd, the owner of the flock, and his work is good.

We often use the word “good” to mean nice or pleasant. If we had a tasty meal, we say it was good. If we like someone, we think they are “good people.” If things go well at the office or at school, we say we had a good day. And while the word can have a very broad meaning, in the Bible it is often used to show the beauty and great value of work that is accomplished. Good seed and good soil yield an abundant crop. Good works bring glory to God. Good fruit brings more good fruit.

So here, when Jesus says He is the good shepherd, He is not saying that He is nice or friendly or likeable. He describes Himself as good because of His work. He is called the Good Shepherd because He cares for His sheep. They belong to Him and He gave His all for them. We know that He is talking about His crucifixion. At the heart of the “goodness” of the shepherd is His work on the Cross. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep he knows.

HE IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD BECAUSE HE LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE

Sometimes people get the wrong idea about Jesus. They view Him only through His lovingkindness and top-notch moral character. He's a good man who cares about people – He heals the sick, He comforts the downtrodden, He picks us up in His arms and encourages our weary souls. All that is true. But is that all there is to the Good Shepherd? If so, there is no cross, there is no atonement for sin.

What Jesus claims in John 10 is that the real force of His goodness is not found in His comforting words or healing touch. It is found in the crucifixion. As gruesome as it sounds, the centerpiece of the Good Shepherd's work is His death on the Cross. So, what can we learn about His death from this passage?

First, I want you to see that it was voluntary. Look at verses 17 and 18:

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.

Let me ask you, how would you answer the question, “Who killed Jesus?” You could respond in a lot of ways.

Was it the Jews who rejected Him? They shouted, Crucify Him! Crucify Him! And, without their condemnation, He would have lived.

Was it the Romans? Pilate sentenced Him to death and the Roman soldiers nailed His hands and feet to the cross.

Or was it all Christians, like you and me? Did we lead Jesus to Calvary? After all, He died because of us and for us.

While each of these answers has a certain amount of truth to it, the best answer is the one Jesus gives here. Jesus willingly and voluntarily went to the cross. God killed Jesus!

It was the decision of the Father and Son together. Jesus received the command from the Father. And He gladly and willingly submitted Himself to His Father's will. In eternity, God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit determined that the Christ would become a man, fulfill the Law and then die for sinners.

I hope that you can grasp the enormous implications of this. The Father gave authority to the Son to do something He has never given to another human – the authority to take His own life – the authority to lay it down. And He did it willingly, knowingly, purposefully – because He also had the authority to take it up again. He had the power and the control over everything that happened at His crucifixion. He could have snapped His fingers and stopped the whole affair. But He did not. Jesus took Himself to the cross. No one made Him go; no one forced Him. He is the Good Shepherd and He lays down his life for the sheep He knows.

The second thing we can learn about His death is that it was vicarious. Vicarious means that one person suffers as a substitute for, in the place of, another person. Jesus says that He died for the sheep. He offered Himself as a substitute for sinners before the holy justice of God. He accepted the guilt for our sins and received God's righteous wrath in our place.

You see, salvation comes not by what we do for ourselves or even what we might do for God. Rather, the heart of the gospel is what Jesus did for us and on our behalf. *For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.* (1 Peter 3:18).

James Montgomery Boice explains: “We are sinners. As sinners we deserve to die (both physically and spiritually); but Christ willingly died in our place, taking our punishment, so that we might be set free from sin and its penalty, in order that we can serve God.”

Friends, unless you get this – that Jesus, the Good Shepherd died in your place – you have missed the beginning point. You have not grabbed hold of salvation and whatever you think you are doing for Him is just wasted effort.

Do you know the story of Francis Gajowniczek? It is a difficult story, but illustrates the point I am making.

It begins in February 1941, when Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish priest, was arrested by the German Gestapo and sent to Auschwitz. Eventually he was assigned to Barracks 14.

One morning there was tension as the ranks of the prisoners lined up for roll call. There had been an escape the night before. After heads were counted, everyone in Barracks 14 was forced to stand in the hot sun until the escapee had been located. The day passed into night and the commandant declared: “The fugitive has not been found. Ten of you will die for him in the starvation bunker!”

Anything was better than this – the gallows or the gas chamber. Starvation was the worst form of torture. After the ten were chosen, the cry rang out from one of the men, “My poor children! My wife! What will they do?”

Suddenly there was commotion in the ranks. A prisoner had volunteered to take this distraught man’s place. It was Father Kolbe. He was not one of the ten. He had much to live for. But this priest spoke softly, saying, “I would like to die in place of one of the men you condemned.”

The commandant ordered it done, and the ten were marched to the place where they would be starved. As the hours and days passed, something extraordinary happened. Those outside heard the faint sound of singing. The condemned prisoners had a shepherd to gently lead them through the shadows of the valley of death, pointing them to the good shepherd.

Francis Gajowniczek was the prisoner whose life was spared. He survived Auschwitz and for 53 years – until his death at age 95 – he joyously told his wife, his children, his children’s children, everyone, about the man who had died in his place.

Have you told anyone about the Good Shepherd who laid down His life in your place, so you might live?

HE IS THE GOOD SHEPHERD BECAUSE HE KNOWS HIS SHEEP

In verse 14, we read, *I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*

There is a universal human longing to be known and cared for by another. We are relational beings and we don't want to be alone. We want someone to know and understand us and to be loved and accepted by that person. Without that kind of understanding, we feel alone and adrift. This is one of our greatest needs. C. S. Lewis called this the "God-shaped hole" in every person's life.

Certainly, we have the ability to know each another. Parents know their children, children their parents. Friends learn what the other likes and doesn't like. Husbands and wives find out what makes the other one tick. In spite of these relationships, we seldom let people know who we really are. We are sinners relating to other sinners and we have a lot of trouble letting other people – even those closest to us – know how we really think and feel.

So for each of us, there is a hunger to be known and understood. It is an emptiness that only God can fill. St. Augustine put it this way: "Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee." We want to know and be known by our Creator.

The Good Shepherd knows His sheep. He understands us and sees us better than we see ourselves. Psalm 139 teaches us:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
 You know when I sit and when I rise;
 you perceive my thoughts from afar.
 You discern my going out and my lying down;
 you are familiar with all my ways.
 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
 You hem me in – behind and before;
 you have laid your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.
 Where can I go from your Spirit?
 Where can I flee from your presence?
 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
 if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
 if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 your right hand will hold me fast.

That's the Good Shepherd. He knows everything about us! He is aware of our flaws and limitations. He knows our secret thoughts. He knows our selfish ambitions and sinful fantasies – those habits of the heart that we don't want anyone else to know. He knows every corner and crevice of our lives and He still calls us His sheep.

How can He do that? Because He gave Himself on the Cross voluntarily and vicariously, as our substitute, paying the penalty for our sin so we don't have to. He is called the Good Shepherd because He lays down his life for the sheep He knows.

That's important because as sheep, we are helpless. Phillip Keller describes how sheep can get stuck on their backs so that they are unable to move – sort of like turtles. They lie down in a little hollow and then roll to one side to stretch or relax. If their center of gravity shifts, they may turn so far that their feet no longer touch the ground. A sheep in that position is called a “cast” sheep. It cannot get up by itself and it must be rescued . . . or it will die. They are helpless and need a shepherd who will carefully and gently put them on their feet.

We are the same. We often lose our spiritual balance, get turned on our backs, and caught up in our own sin. We find ourselves foolishly trapped upside-down because we leaned after what this world has to offer. Without a good shepherd who knows us and loves us, a shepherd who gently restores us we'd be in trouble. That's why Psalm 139 ends with *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Note that this was not just an offer made to first-century Israel. Jesus said: *I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.* Sheep will be gathered not just from Judaism as the first converts were, but from all over the world. The spread of Christianity across the globe confirms this prophecy. So does the conversion to Christ of people from different races and backgrounds and languages across our planet and across the street. That is why Faith Church and the EPC is committed to being missional – to sharing the good news around the world.

You see, the proclamation of the gospel is what the Good Shepherd wants. It is always at the heart of Christian ministry. The Lord exhorts every one of us to preach and witness the good news. Hear what the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them [that is, telling others about Jesus]? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.
(Rom. 10:14-17)

And look at the certainty of this message gospel. Richard Phillips wrote that Jesus does not declare that He merely hopes for more sheep. He does not simply predict that this will happen. He says, “I have” other sheep. Every Christian, including those not yet saved, were known to Jesus and belonged to him from all eternity.

Jesus calls them all His own and promises that they will listen to His voice. It is hard to imagine stronger terms to declare the sovereignty of Christ's saving plans and His certainty of success in gathering all of His own sheep. He is the Good Shepherd; He knows His sheep and His sheep know Him.

The good work of the Good Shepherd, the great “I Am,” was His substitutionary death on the Cross. It is because of the sovereign plan of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to crucify the Lamb of God, that His helpless sheep – like you and me – are put back on our feet . . . instead of being left to die. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep He knows.