

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Not a Hired Hand”

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Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11-15).

The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is among the most treasured. It’s in our windows and on our banners. Because it’s so teachable even to young children, we give them VBS coloring pages of the Good Shepherd and hang pictures of the Good Shepherd in classrooms. We teach them to sing “I am Jesus Little Lamb.”

But it’s also comforting as adults. As an empty nester I like to remind myself the Good Shepherd continues to watch over my kids. I often use Psalm 23 in the hospital setting and read Psalm 23 at every funeral. We sing, “The King of Love My Shepherd Is.” We named our church after the Good Shepherd. Suffice it to say we treasure this image.

However, in our text Jesus is not using this image to teach the little children. He’s not using it to comfort someone on his deathbed. He’s actually using it to rebuke a group of Pharisees. You see, Jesus has just healed a beggar who was born blind. Of course, He had to do it on a Sabbath. So, the Pharisees are peeved and upset. Imagine, they cannot even rejoice with a man who is seeing the beauty of God’s creation for the very first time in his life. Instead, they harass him . . . and his parents. They try to get him to say that Jesus has sinned. When he refuses, they throw him out of the synagogue, which is sort of like excommunicating him.

Hearing they did this to the man, Jesus goes out looking for him. It shows us His pastoral heart. And when He finds him, Jesus comforts him, but also assures him that He, Jesus, is the promised Messiah. And the man responds with faith. He sees things rightly for the very first time in his life: physical and spiritually.

But let’s not forget about those Pharisees who badgered and bullied this man as if he had done something wrong. They don’t really care about him. They cannot rejoice in his healing. They are not concerned about any spiritual damage they do to him or his family by casting him out of the synagogue. In their minds, he’s just a beggar . . . no great loss to the synagogue.

Notice the difference between their reckless condemnation of this man, and the pastoral care Jesus has for him. *This* is why Jesus starts talking about the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep verses the hired hands who care nothing for the sheep, only for themselves.

In the Bible a hired hand was a laborer usually employed only for a limited time. They didn’t have a lot of skills, but they could pick up field stones before spring planting or help harvest grapes in fall. In a pinch, they could even keep watch over a flock. Typically, the hired hand moved from one gig to the next with little dedication to the work or the employer.

At the time, a day’s wages for a hired hand was one denarius. You didn’t pay them much, nor did you expect much. Some worked hard; others . . . No matter—at the end of the day each received a denarius. In the parable, of course the hired hand would not know the sheep because he hasn’t spent appreciable time with them.

Contrast that with the true shepherd. Many were born into the work. The family owned a flock, and a boy was sent out with the flock as soon as he was old enough to go. The sheep became his companions, friends even. To you and me sheep all look pretty much the same, as if stamped out of a machine press, but the true shepherd recognizes them, knows their names, their personalities, their quirks. The family’s livelihood

was all wrapped up in the welfare of the flock. If the flock does not flourish, the family does not flourish. You can imagine then the owners would be much more protective of the sheep, much more willing to take risks to defend them from predators or thieves.

For the hired hand, it's a different story. They are not his sheep. He doesn't own them. He doesn't know them. And besides he's paid a denarius a day. To take on thieves for a denarius. Fat chance. He reckons his life is worth more. So, he skedaddles. Who wouldn't? I think we can understand the impulse to preserve your own life, especially if it's just the life of a sheep that hangs in the balance. It's perfectly reasonable, perfectly natural.

Last year, my dog Toby trotted out on a pond with thin ice. Sure enough, on the far side, he went through. He was trying for all his worth to pull himself out of the ice, but the ice just kept breaking in front of him. My dog was in deep trouble, and I love that dog. So I ran around the edge of the pond and was prepared to go in after him, but by that time he had managed to pull himself out. Don't be impressed with my willingness to go in after him. I knew the water there is only four feet deep. If it had been twenty feet, I do not know what I would have done. You read about such things in the newspaper.

Not accidentally but deliberately, Jesus laid down his life for the sheep. It was neither rational nor prudent. He's certainly not thinking about the money nor his own welfare. He's thinking only of the sheep.

It must mean He loves us. In spite of everything! In spite of the fact that we are just foolish sheep. In spite of the fact that we have strayed from Him, ignored His voice, resisted His guidance. Though we cause Him so much trouble, still He loves us.

For him, it's unthinkable to cut and run because of wolves or thieves. That would be a disaster for the flock. And remember, Jesus can't stand the idea of losing even one.

Notice also the possessive adjective: "my" as when he says, "my sheep." Notice the sense of ownership there . . . not like a master owns a slave, but rather as one who takes responsibility for us, even for our sin. On the cross where He lays down His life, it's as if He says, "You are not a sinner; I am. You have not sinned; I have. You are not responsible for a single transgression. I did it." That Jesus would do that for us? See what kind of love the Father has for us that he should claim our sins as His own and call us "my sheep."

Jesus says, "I lay down my life for the sheep . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again." Jesus is willing to give Himself to the wolf in order to protect the sheep. He is committed in that way. But He is also capable, capable of dying for our sin. Capable of rising from the dead Himself. Capable of giving us the victory through His forgiveness. Capable of raising us from the grave too.

Unlike the hired hands, as our Good Shepherd, Jesus is committed and capable. But He is not committed to you only. In verse 16, Jesus tells the Pharisees, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also" into the flock.

This is why Jesus sends out His disciples. We get to participate in His commitment to gather other sheep into the fold. We do it the same way He did it, through selfless service and gracious words. Sometimes we can be like the hired hands who are concerned only about self-preservation and money, while caring nothing for others. But Jesus forgives us of that selfishness and shows us a different way. He is gracious and merciful and restores us . . . not to be hired hands but to be sons and daughters.

"I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also." You can be the voice of the Good Shepherd to others. There are people in your life who will never step foot in a church, and so they'll never hear my voice. Yet they are searching (without much success, I think) for one who is both committed to them and capable of protecting them and making them secure. No man can do that for them . . . not any politician. Not any doctor or financial planner. Only Jesus the Good Shepherd can make them secure from sin, death and the devil.

Jesus is their Good Shepherd too. He has laid down His life for them and He has taken it back up for them. He is not a hired hand. He is committed and capable. Through us, His Church, His people, Jesus continues to gather sheep into His fold. Amen.