

GOSPEL READING: John 10:11-18

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[Jesus said], “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ 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.”

Holy wisdom, holy word. Thanks be to God.

EPISTLE READING: 1 John 3:16-24

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¹⁶ We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. ¹⁷ How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

¹⁸ Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ¹⁹ And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him ²⁰ whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. ²¹ Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; ²² and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.

²³ And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.

This is the word of the Lord...Thanks Be to God.

“Exploding the Jobsworth Syndrome”¹

In my readings this week, I came across a term that evidently the British have coined to describe a person who will do no more than the bare minimum that their job requires. They’re called a “jobsworth”! David Heim explains that the term comes from the answer that such people give when asked to do a task, “No, that’s more than my jobsworth”!² We’ve all worked with folks like this at some point in our lives. Frustrating, annoying. “No, that’s more than my jobsworth. I’m not doing THAT!” But if we’re honest....there’s probably been days when WE’VE been “jobsworths” too, right? Well, Jesus, through the apostle, John, in both the gospel text and John’s letters to the churches, explodes the jobsworth syndrome, insofar as it regards our job of being sheep of the Good Shepherd.

In the gospel text, he does this in a sermon to the crowd at the Feast of Dedication, or possibly in a discourse with the Pharisees. He uses a familiar image of a shepherd and his sheep and introduces the character, “the hired hand”. *My mom used to talk about THE hired hands on the farm on which she was raised, men who would get up so early and work hard that they were ready for a full steak and potatoes meal by 10am. She spoke of their dedication and their bravery, once rescuing her and her sister when they were in the path of a bull which had broken from its pen. Always my mother spoke so highly of the hired hand.* Not so, here in John 10. Scholars are unsure as to who the “hired hand” represents in John’s context...possibly the Pharisees, the ones who took advantage of the Jews, but for certain this hired hand is not what he pretends to be, a self-giving, caring shepherd of the sheep. He is instead a very uninvolved and apathetic fake. He puts forth minimal effort...just enough to make his daily wage. And when danger threatens, he’s the one who flees, abandoning the sheep to fend for themselves.

Quite the opposite is described with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Jesus fully assumes the vocation, given him by God, and he invests his whole self into it. The sheep are the reason for his being. He does not just lead them. He cares for them, nourishing, doctoring and protecting them. They belong to him. They are his. And he knows them as he knows himself. He knows

¹David Heim. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/april-22-easter-4b-psalm-23-1-john-316-24-john-1011-18>. (accessed 4/20/18).

²David Heim..

their quirky characteristics, their weaknesses, their flaws, their blind spots, just as he knows their marvelous strengths, all which make them who they are. And they know him...his walk, his touch, his voice. When he calls them, each by their name, out of a herd of hundreds of others, they will separate themselves and come to him. They will faithfully follow him home, to that place where they know the waters are still and the pastures are green. They do not fear that the bond between them will ever break, and they trust that when it is threatened, their Good Shepherd will defend it with his very life. No equivocation. No qualifiers. The Good Shepherd lays down his very life for the sheep. (*pause*)

If you do not know already, it's worth stopping here to make clear that in this analogy, WE ARE THE SHEEP! We're the smelly, dirty creatures who are very vulnerable to wolves and other predators, to fast running currents, to getting weighed down with brambles in our wool, to getting lost and starving in fields which are barren. We are the ones who hunger for relationships and who yearn for acceptance, who need help when we hurt, are misunderstood, afraid, or lost. We are the sheep.

We are the sheep. And you know, as humbling as this is, it is comforting to me to know it. It means we're not the gate nor the gatekeeper. We're not the ones on which the safety and security of the fold hinges in this dangerous world of sin, nor are we the ones to determine who's allowed in the fold. It is not up to us to judge which sheep "belong" and which are "other". The Good Shepherd says that those outside our fold belong to him too, and he'll bring them along in due time.³ We are the sheep and our Good Shepherd lays down his life for us.

Have you ever had the experience of another person saying something on your behalf which put them at risk...something like, "*Hey, when you're picking on her/him, you're picking on me*"? Have you ever had the experience of another person involving themselves so specifically and so deeply in your life that they lose their job, or put in jeopardy their own well-fair, or maybe their life? *Several years ago, I was driving and heard an incredible true story on the radio. I do not know the original source. I don't even know the station I was listening to, but I*

³ Deborah Hannay Sunoo. Sermon: "Our Good Shepherd". <http://www.magpres.org/blog-sermons/our-g--d-shepherd-psalm-23-and-john-101-16>. (accessed 4/20/18).

remember the story. There was a young boy whose younger sister was very ill with a life-threatening blood disease. The child was found to be in immediate need of some additional blood. In fact, the parents were told that without blood, their girl would die. The best match, the most similar blood type was her brother's. The parents approached their son and asked him to consider giving blood to his sister. The boy asked if he might think on it overnight. The parents agreed. The next morning, he told them that he would indeed give his blood to his sister to save her life. The physician reported that during the transfusion, the boy was very quiet as he lay on the gurney, his eyes always watching his sister on the bed beside him. Finally, after some time the boy spoke calmly and asked the doctor, "When will I begin to die?" The doctors were stunned, and I still am as I tell the story. The boy thought that if his sister's gain of the blood would save her life, then with the loss of his blood, he would lose his. And he was willing to still do it. What love!⁴

Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." And indeed, Jesus laid down his life, not for us only, but for the whole world, those of his flock and those Others. And he did it on his own accord. He "was not a savior for hire, as if he had to be induced to carry out a divine assignment."⁵ In his "I am" (*ego eimi*) claim, reminiscent of God's "I am that I am", Jesus identifies himself with God and states that he has taken up God's mission, God's redemptive work for all people, for all creation. It is no wonder then that at times of crisis we turn to Jesus, not only because he can POINT out paths that lead through dark valleys, but because he has WALKED the darkest paths himself and marked a trail for us to follow. This is what lifts hearts in hospital beds, waiting rooms, unemployment lines, and funeral homes. This is what sparks our courage to take a new breath and go forward.⁶

Now, you may be wondering what happens to the sheep, who protects them after their shepherd has laid down his life, after he has died? Well, I will answer by using a story imagined by Barbara Brown Taylor. She imagines the dream that the disciples had on the night

⁴ Anon.

⁵ David Heim.

⁶ David Heim.

before Jesus died. She says, *“They all fell asleep after that big meal, with the sound of the shepherd’s flute in their ears. And as they slept, they shared a terrible dream: of wolves with clubs and torches who came out of the woods, led their shepherd away, and tore him to shreds on a hillside outside of town. In the dream, they huddled for safety, unable to think, unable to move, and they stayed that way for three whole days, wondering if they would starve to death before the wolves came back to finish the job. But then on the third day, they heard a flute, far away at first, then drawing nearer, nearer. It woke them from their sleep, and they stood once again in the presence of their good shepherd. Everything was the same again, but everything had changed. Looking at each other, they saw what had happened. They had fallen asleep as sheep, but they had woken up as shepherds, themselves. As they slept, every one of them had been changed into the image of their master, and as they stood there staring at one another he handed them staves like his, and flutes, and sent them out to gather others for the flock. ‘Do for them as I did for you,’ he said, and he played them a little tune as they set off to do just that.”*⁷

Yes, friends it is the witness of his profound, self-giving, gracious love, the willing sacrifice of his life for us, and it’s the power of our Good Shepherd’s living spirit IN us which releases us from our own jobsworth syndrome, which explodes the jobsworth syndrome everywhere. We are now free to invest ourselves fully in our new jobs of listening, following, and then gathering others for Jesus’ flock... all others, whoever is placed in our paths. And we are free to give all we have in standing against the hired hands who flee in the face of danger and who selfishly attempt to undermine the flock’s flourishing. We are free to give our whole selves in the love and care of neighbor and all creation, *“not only in word or speech, but in truth and action”*. And, brothers and sisters, we can be assured that this job is worth it. It is worth it. For through it, through doing our Good Shepherd’s work, *“goodness and mercy shall follow all the days of our lives, and we will indeed dwell in the house of the Lord forever”*. Amen.

⁷ Barbara Brown Taylor. “The Shepherd’s Flute” in: *The Bread of Angels* (Lanham, MD: Cowley Pub; 1997)83-83..