

**Weekend of Sunday, April 25, 2021**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B**  
**First Reading: Acts 4:5-12**  
**Second Reading: 1 John 3:16-24**  
**Gospel Reading: John 10:11-18**  
**Sermon Title: “The Good Shepherd”**

**Theme**

*In language that recalls the twenty-third psalm, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who cares for his sheep. He is willing to die for them, and he is able to overcome death for them.*

**Text**

**1 John 3:16-24**

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. <sup>17</sup>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?

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

<sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>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.

**John 10:11-18**

Jesus said:] <sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. <sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

## Sermon

This Sunday is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday” and the reason is probably obvious to you. Jesus calls himself the good shepherd in the Gospel Reading. And if we used the appointed psalm in worship here at Zion, we would be reciting the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. But alas, we don’t use the psalm very often and during the pandemic, we are being intentional about keeping the service to about 45 minutes, so it will not be present today. In the Gospel Reading Jesus defines himself as the good shepherd apart from another shepherd who is a hired hand, for example.

As I understand it, in those days on the grassy prairies of Palestine, there were numerous predators including lions, bears, leopards, foxes, and wolves, all of whom loved lamb chops. Shepherding as a hireling was not a good-paying glorious job. Awake all day trying to keep the stupid sheep from wandering off and getting lost or spooked by just about anything. And awake all night keeping the flock safe when other beasts of prey attempted to attack the flock. They were out in the pastures away from civilization for months at a time, do you get the picture? So, let me ask you, if you were a shepherd who was a hireling, and a lion attacked the flock, are you going to fight for your master’s investment? Probably not, and this was Jesus’ point. He is the good shepherd. The sheep are his. In another passage, he said the sheep know his voice and come to him. Here in John, Jesus said,

<sup>14</sup>I know my own and my own know me

John’s Gospel is twenty-one chapters long and this passage comes from Chapter Ten, about midway in the story. Just before this passage, Jesus healed the man born blind on the Sabbath – you will remember this story, because the religious leaders made a big deal out of Jesus healing the man on the Sabbath, and in doing their investigation, interrogate the man who was healed and his parents. Remember the story? It is in response to the religious leaders' investigation that Jesus said those words, “*I know my own and my own know me.*” It is as if he were saying to them, “I get it that you don't get it. You don't accept my messiahship.”

God revealed in Jesus Christ is Lord of all and yet the majority of the population of the world do not acknowledge him as Lord. Even in our own country, community, and neighborhood, some claim him as Lord and Savior, and to some others, his

name is just a swear word. Jesus said, "*I know my own and my own know me.*" And about those who know him he said, <sup>15b</sup>I lay down my life for the sheep.

I asked Kaari to use the famous Warner Sallman portrait, "The Lord is My Shepherd" throughout the sermon. Sallman is best known for his Christian religious imagery. I have two pieces in my office that have been in my family for years; "Head of Christ" and "Christ at Heart's Door." "The Lord is My Shepherd" was painted in 1942. And while his work is criticized today for being overly romanticized and too Anglo, in 1994, *The New York Times* wrote that he was the "best-known artist of the century."

The reason that I refer to that painting is that it includes us. We are those sheep who surround Jesus. I am that black one behind him, but still one of his sheep. Sometimes we need to be carried like that little lamb in his arms, but most of the time we are the faithful who don't wander far from him.

But Jesus didn't stop there, did he? No, what he also said was,

<sup>16</sup>I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Now we could debate what *we* think Jesus meant in First Century Palestine, but to cut that discussion short, I refer to my Jewish Commentary on the New Testament, where they say that Jesus was referring to both the Jews who have not come around to his messiahship, and the Gentiles – those who are not Jewish, including the Romans, the Samaritans, and the other several pagan cultures that were farther away from Palestine. Today we would simply say all people who are not Christian and do not call Jesus Lord of their lives. About them, Jesus said, 'they are my sheep too, and I must bring them along because there is only one flock and one shepherd.'

In my vocation as a parish pastor, I have served as:

- president of the Cortland ministerial of about eight churches doing ministry for that small town,
- president of the Trumbull County Lutheran Ministerial,
- I have been on the Synod Council,

- and I was even the Dean of the Eastern Conference of the NEOS which is Trumbull Mahoning, and Columbiana counties.

I enjoyed being involved in the Cortland Ministerial because we serviced the people of the community I lived in. For the same reason, I enjoyed my involvement in the Trumbull County Lutheran Ministerial. But when I was Dean, I was frustrated, because, at that time, I could get Trumbull County together, and the team players of Mahoning County, but the pastors and congregations of Columbiana County are some lone rangers. They would never participate and that left me frustrated. So when I came to Zion that was my opportunity to resign as the dean. I never wanted to be the dean anyway. I've never aspired to be a bishop either. I'd rather be a big fish in a small pond.

Contrast my example with Jesus'. Even in Chapter Ten, already knowing his fate, he said, 'I've got this little band of followers, but, as they would say down in North Carolina, all y'all belong to me. There is only one flock and one shepherd. I must gather all of them to myself.'

I think this passage is a challenge to most Christians even when we argue that it isn't. This is why I say that: the traditional church encourages membership. We want you to sign on the line to become a member, and the reasons for that are good ones. When someone becomes a member there are expectations of membership:

- to live among God's faithful people,
- to hear the word of God and participate in the holy supper,
- learn the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments,
- Study the holy scriptures,
- Be nurtured in faith and prayer,
- learn to trust God,
- proclaim Christ through word and deed,
- care for others and the world God made,
- and work for justice and peace.

This should not be a surprise to any of you, the sheep that surround Jesus because we repeat it every time we baptize or receive new members or confirm the faith of

members. I don't rush to the homes of regular attending visitors because I want to give them time to decide to become members who are committed to the cause of Christ and committed to being his sheep.

But others don't get that, and maybe never will. They want to do with their lives what they want to do, including the use of their resources of time, talent, and treasure. I don't blame them. I have moments when I am selfish too. But selfishness is beneath our call as members of Jesus' flock. Jesus laid down his life for the forgiveness of my sins and for that I owe him everything, though he only asks for a portion.

Jesus laid down his life for the forgiveness of the sins of everyone, even those who called for his crucifixion, and those who choose to ignore him today.

John, the disciple, is the articulate well-spoken author of the First Reading known as First John. He defined love when he wrote:

<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us

And he went on to define what we ought to do with that love when he wrote,

<sup>16b</sup>and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

That is a seriously big ask! By one another, I believe he meant the others within the fellowship of faith, and while I do not disagree with John, I think Jesus would say, we ought to lay down our lives for our fellow human beings, even those outside the fellowship of faith. Referring back to the Gospel Reading, these are those about whom Jesus said, are not in his fold or flock, but are still his sheep.

The rest of John's First letter is a call to action. I love what he wrote in v18:

<sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

What great and inspiring words! Let us love – not by simply saying we love, but demonstrating our love in "truth and action." And here I must say, we do pretty well. I don't work in Food Distribution, but I sure do like walking through and hearing people give thanks for what we do. Same with VITA that we just completed. I gave blood at Thursday's blood drawing and while I was laying there

the new director came up, introduced herself, and thanked me as the pastor for providing this space and a full slate of donors, and she wanted to meet me because she had heard of our generosity during the pandemic quarantine. I love to hear from members who love to serve in these various ministries. You may not use John's words but when you serve, you are laying down your time, talent, and treasure for the entirety of Jesus' flock and fold. That has to make him smile.

I always try to conclude my sermons with an exhortation, a word of encouragement to live up to our calling as disciples of Christ, but this week it sounds more like a pat on the back doesn't it. Well, that's okay.

Let me finish with this. I am proud to be the pastor of this great old church and that is not because of the beauty of the place, or its sheer size, but because of you, its people, members, and visitors alike who do the ministry we do together. Now if you cannot relate to the things I've said, and it is causing you to wonder where you might be able to participate more, then good for the Holy Spirit and good for you. Take that nudge and move into ministry more. There is plenty of room for you alongside us.

### **Prayer**

Good shepherd of all, we give you thanks that you have called us and we knew your voice and have kept close. Help us to appreciate that you have other sheep, not of our fold, and inspire us to reach out to welcome and serve them in truth and action. We pray this in your name. Amen