

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

April 21, 2024 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, Year B)  
John 10:11-18

You may have heard this story before:

Late one night, a burglar broke into a house that he thought was empty. He tiptoed through the living room, but suddenly he froze when he heard a small voice say; "Jesus is watching you."

Silence returned to the house, so the burglar crept forward again. A few moments later, he heard the voice again "Jesus is watching you."

The burglar stopped dead in his tracks. He was frightened. Frantically, he looked all around the room. In a dark corner, he spotted a bird cage and in the cage was a parrot. He asked the parrot: "Was that you who said Jesus is watching me?"

"Yes," Said the parrot.

The burglar breathed a sigh of relief, then asked the parrot: "What's your name?"

"Moses," said the bird.

The robber replied, "What kind of silly people would name their parrot Moses?"

The parrot looked up and said "The same people who named the rottweiler Jesus!"

The fourth Sunday of Easter is called "Good Shepherd Sunday," because all three years of the lectionary cycle give us readings from the 10th Chapter of the gospel of John, where the Good Shepherd is DESCRIBED. When we THINK of Jesus "the Good Shepherd," we always think of his meek and sympathetic manner towards those who went wrong in life.

But the "Good Shepherd" of today's gospel is completely different. In THIS part of the description, the shepherd isn't ONLY one who tenderly caresses the wounded sheep, but also the FIERCE PROTECTOR, the FIGHTER who, at the risk of his own life, stands up to ANYBODY who THREATENS his flock.

The passage begins with Jesus saying: "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." But HERE, the word "good" doesn't mean sentimental, sweet, tender, or not hurting anybody; it means "the TRUE shepherd," "the AUTHENTIC shepherd." Jesus is the true shepherd not because he cuddles and CARESSES his sheep, but because he loves them SO MUCH that he's ready to lay down his LIFE for them.

Remember what it means when the Bible REPEATS something in close proximity? It means pay ATTENTION, this is IMPORTANT! Well, count how many times the expression "lays down his life" is used in this text. In just 8 verses, Jesus says it FIVE times. You kind of get the impression he wants us to NOTICE this point.

To emphasize it even FURTHER, Jesus goes on to CONTRAST it with the figure of the "hired hand." The hired hand works for the money. A hired hand's contract didn't require that he lay down his LIFE for the sheep. Sheep herders were supposed to PROTECT their flocks, but not to risk their LIVES. It was understood by everyone that no HUMAN should ever DIE for an ANIMAL! So the hired hand was allowed to run AWAY, because, after all, he wasn't CONCERNED with the FLOCK, but with his PAY.

We saw a very public and tragic EXAMPLE of this back in 2018. Do you remember Scot Peterson, the security guard at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school in Parkland, Florida? He was a hired hand. When the shots rang out, he called for help, but he never went IN the building, he never ENGAGED the shooter, he never RISKED his life – he never risked ANYTHING. And because he didn't see HIMSELF as anything more than a "hired hand," 17 lambs of God's fold were slaughtered.

But he wasn't the ONLY shepherd there that fateful day. Aaron Feis was an assistant football coach and school security guard. When the shots rang out, he ran TOWARDS them. He stood in FRONT of two students, and took the bullets that were INTENDED for THEM. He later died in surgery. He literally gave his life so other people could live. I don't know if Aaron Feis was a Christian

(they never reported that), but he seemed to have LEARNED something from the Good Shepherd. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." Aaron Feis BORE the IMAGE of the Good Shepherd very WELL.

You see, this isn't the ONLY time Jesus uses that phrase, "lay down one's life," in this Gospel. Just a few chapters later, Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to LAY DOWN one's life for one's FRIENDS" (John 15:13). As people of God's flock, we are called to FOLLOW in his footsteps.

But if we had to follow in THESE footsteps, we might RATHER be the hired hand. We might RATHER find EVERY EXCUSE possible, every EXPLANATION IMAGINABLE, to REFUSE Jesus' command. We might repeatedly DENY being a CHRISTIAN, deny EVEN KNOWING him, JUST like Peter did. When it was a dangerous time, he was asked, "Surely, you are one of his disciples, aren't you?" Peter said "I am NOT."

But Jesus won't LET Peter say no. At the end of the Gospel, Jesus says, "Simon Peter, do you love me? ... Tend my sheep. ... Feed my lambs. ... Shepherd my sheep." So, as much as we would like to leave "lay(ing) down my life" to Jesus alone, Jesus reminds us that being a good shepherd is OUR calling too.

At some point we have to accept the fact that WE are asked to be shepherds as well. ALL Christians are called to be good shepherds. Whoever wants to be a disciple of Christ must REFLECT that IMAGE of their master. Christians don't MEASURE how FAR or how MUCH they can love their brother or sister; they're led ENTIRELY by love. If a Christian is SATISFIED with doing the MINIMUM, then they haven't really UNDERSTOOD what TRUE LOVE IS. If we love our brothers and sisters, or serve our communities, or care for our earth, in the hope of getting some advantage, some gratitude and prestige, or even a reward in HEAVEN, we aren't really FOLLOWING CHRIST'S way. "The Good Shepherd lays down his LIFE for his sheep."

For some (like first responders and soldiers), the call is LITERALLY to RISK their lives for others. But for MOST of us, the call ISN'T to give our lives FOR the sheep; instead, we ARE, EVERY ONE of us, called to give our life TO his sheep, to shepherd OTHERS. So that THEY TOO may know the comfort of the GOOD Shepherd; that THEY TOO may lie down in green pastures; and that THEY TOO may walk beside still waters.

The Good Shepherd RISKS for his sheep. The Good Shepherd FIGHTS for his sheep. The Good Shepherd GIVES LIFE TO his sheep. And he does it THROUGH YOU.

The world needs to REMEMBER that JESUS is WATCHING. Amen.