

Fourth Sunday of Easter; Good Shepherd Sunday; April 30, 2023

+ John 10:11-16 +

“The Good Shepherd Knows His Sheep”

**“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. Because he works for money, he does not care about the sheep.”**

**“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me (just as the Father knows me and I know the Father). And I lay down my life for the sheep. I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them into the herd.”**

My friend was a huge fan of the basketball player Michael Jordan. The walls of his bedroom were coated with Michael Jordan posters, including the iconic picture of him at the peak of his leap from the free throw line to the basket in the 1989 slam dunk competition. In the background there are hundreds of people, all with a similar expression. Their eyebrows are raised and their mouths are open, just like Jordan without the tongue out.

Once I started staring at all those people in the background. Faces in the crowd. I looked at individuals in the crowd shot and started to wonder, “What’s that guy’s name?” “What does she do for a living?” “That dude’s pretty old. I wonder if he’s still with us.” After watching me stand there staring for a few minutes my friend asked me what I was doing and I told him. He said, “You’re weird.”

Maybe I am, but it’s something I do all the time. When I watch TV shows I’m always looking at the extras in the background and wondering, “How did she get to the point of being an extra on this show?” “What’s that guy’s name? It won’t be in the credits. I wonder if his acting career ever took off.”

My friend called me weird for doing that, and I forgave him. Because it is strange. For most people, faces in the crowd don’t much matter. It’s easy to ignore strangers in the background. It’s also easy to feel like one of them. Unknown and unknowable. Every day walking past people who don’t know your name, where you’re from, or what you’re like. And they’re not very interested, either.

This feeling is growing stronger and stronger today, as people spend less and less time in each other’s physical company, disengaging more and more from in person activities. More and more we feel anonymous, nameless, unknown. It is easy to feel that way. And for a Christian, it is also wrong, always wrong, to feel that way.

Whoever translated the Gospel of John for the Evangelical Heritage Version (the translation we use), has a bad habit of putting parentheses around statements that are not really parenthetical. He did it on Easter and now he’s doing it again on this Good Shepherd Sunday. Let’s look at the second half of verse 14 and the first half of verse 15. Jesus says, **“I know my sheep and my sheep know me (just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.)”** Please ignore those ill-advised parentheses. What Jesus says about knowing the Father and Father knowing him is not a sidenote.

Jesus and Father know each other perfectly. They are equally God from eternity, with perfect knowledge of all things. But they are also so close to each other that, while they are separate Persons, they are the one and the same God. Jesus is the Father’s only begotten Son, which is a Biblical phrase that’s hard to

define. The Father did not create or procreate the Son. But they stand together in that special unified relationship of Father and Son through all eternity. Fathers and sons typically know each other well, if their relationship is close and tight. The divine Father and Son stand in the perfectly unified relationship and so they know each other in every detail.

And here's why that statement is so important. Jesus says he knows each one of us just like he knows the Father: with absolute perfection, in every detail. He calls himself the Good Shepherd twice in these verses. Good shepherds know their sheep well. They have to. Sheep are helpless hapless creatures who must be known well by their shepherd in order to survive. They cannot feed themselves or protect themselves. They cannot adequately clean themselves to keep themselves disease-free. The shepherd must do all that for them. And in order to do it well, he has to know each sheep individually. "That one's always getting so much dirt stuck in its nose that it can't breathe. That one's so silly he'll go toward his predators. That one's so skittish that the sound of running water scares him. That one's so nearsighted it will wander right off a cliff."

But why does Jesus know us so well? Answer one: he's God, and he knows everything. That's true. But there's a much more important, and comforting answer. And Jesus gives it to us when he speaks negatively about hired hands: **"The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. Because he works for money, he does not care about the sheep."**

As he contrasts himself with hired watchers, Jesus tells us they do not own their sheep. The sheep do not belong to them. We do belong to our Good Shepherd. We belong to him, because unlike the hired hands, **"The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** Jesus saw us, gripped in the jaws of our snarling enemy, who was ready to carry us off to his lair and devour us. He saw us and sprang into action to save us. He put his sheep ahead of himself and his own life. He laid down his life to rescue us helpless sheep from the destruction of Satan and hell. "Laid down" is a beautiful and accurate description. No one forced Jesus to do this for us.

So why did he? When talking about the hired hand, he says, **"He does not care about the sheep."** But the Good Shepherd does care about us. He loves us with all his heart. His eternal love for his sheep is what led him to lay down his life for them, of his own free will. He did it to save us, not just from the wolf and his eternal destruction, but from our own wandering from his voice in his Word, our silly neglect of the spiritual food he offers us, the sinful dirt we have rolled around in.

Not only did Jesus care about us enough to rescue us from Satan and our sin, he also cared to make us part of his flock: **"I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock and one shepherd."** Jesus laid down his life for the whole world, and those who believe it become part of the Good Shepherd's flock. But why have you believed? Why have you become a sheep in his flock? No sheep ever chooses its shepherd. If it were up to the sheep, it would foolishly stay out on its own and be doomed. No, the Good Shepherd "brings them." Please realize, this is you Jesus is talking about. **"This sheep pen"** may be the disciples, or the whole nation of Israel to which Christ had come. Either way, we weren't part of "this sheep pen." But even before we were born, our Good Shepherd knew us and knew he would bring us into his pen. And through the Spirit's gift of faith, he has. We are in the pen of the Holy Christian Church, a huge flock that he has made "one" under his care.

And think of all the different sizes, shapes, colors, and personalities of the sheep now in Jesus' pen. The Holy Christian Church is beyond number and full of very different people from all over the planet and all through history. But because the Good Shepherd is God, he holds them all under his perfect care.

Jesus knew us. He knew we were dead meat without his sacrifice for our sins, so he laid down his life to rescue us. He knew us before we were born, chose us, and brought us into the pen of Church. So we believe him when he says, **"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me (just as the Father knows me and I know the Father)."** When we find ourselves thinking that no one really knows us, that we are extras and anonymous faces in a crowd, our thinking is not only narcissistic but also sinfully wrong. What am I saying about my Jesus when I mope about that way? What am I saying about whom I belong to, his care for me, his work to make me part of his flock, his knowledge of me?

Jesus knows you as perfectly as he knows his Father. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows our individual sin, such as those thoughts that we are nobodies. He knows our sin better than we do. And you may want to interrupt: "Hold on! I know my sin! I just stood up half an hour ago and admitted my sin and asked for forgiveness!" Yes, we know we are sinners. But could we ever comprehend the true depth of it? Could I ever be aware of how often I have sinned unknowingly, simply because I'm too wrapped up in myself to be concerned about others? This is why it's a good idea, at least once in a while, to confess our hidden faults, our unknown sins. We can't ever know them all. But Jesus does.

He also knows even better than we do that he has rescued us from that sin, and the prowling predator that because of it had us in his grasp. The same St. John who wrote this Gospel also wrote in his first letter about our hearts condemning us. There are times when we doubt our forgiveness, especially after we fall into some especially dark sin, or a sin we promised ourselves we'd never return to. Jesus knows better. He knows the eternal and omnipotent power of the blood he shed on the cross. He knows we are totally forgiven, even better than we do.

Jesus knows something else about that you don't know: he knows your future. He knows what's over that hill in front of you. He knows how to get you through your challenges, even when you don't know how it could ever work out. Even better, he knows how to guide through every patch so that you walk faster and firmer to the green pastures of heaven.

It is exactly for this reason – that he knows us better than we know ourselves – that our Shepherd calls us to know him perfectly: **"I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me...I also have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."** On a typical day, I hear many voices. You probably do, too. The voices of people you love; the checker at the grocery store; your boss; a news anchor on tv; political voices; cultural voices; kind voices; evil voices that want to pull you away from your Shepherd, who speak on behalf of the wolf. Some of these voices are good. Some are harmless. Others, like those in final category, are deadly dangerous, especially when the wolves come in sheep's clothing.

Only one voice speaking to you is perfect: your Good Shepherd's. His voice tells you that he cares about you above all others; that he has rescued you and made you one of his other sheep, within the pen of his Holy Church; and that he knows you perfectly. He tells you much more, too. He tells you how to live, how to think, what to say. Why does he say those things to you? Because those are same things your Shepherd thinks, the same things he does, the same thoughts he thinks. When you listen to his voice, you walk with him in faith and follow him, and wander no more into sin, into the wolf's territory.

And there is no better place to be than at your Savior's side. Where better to be than at the side of the Shepherd who has called you to be his sheep, who laid down his life for you willingly and took it up again, who leads in the green pastures and quiet waters of his love, all the way to heaven? Listen to his loving voice. And you will know – more and more perfectly – the Shepherd who knows you perfectly. Amen.