

## A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*One Shepherd, One Flock*

Joh 10:11-18

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Think of the many pictures of Jesus that help us connect with him. In the Gospel of John alone, he is a Spring of Living Water from which the thirsty can draw; the Grapevine to which we remain connected, the Light of the World who gives sight to the blind, Bread for the hungry, the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world, and the Shepherd, the Good Shepherd. Is there any more enduring image of Jesus than Good Shepherd? Today, let us fix our eyes on this beautiful picture: Jesus as *the* Good Shepherd, that in faith we may confess together to Jesus as *our* Good Shepherd. That by grace a prayer may rise on each of our lips to Jesus, *my* Good Shepherd.

Under the watchful care of the Good Shepherd, we are able to see ourselves cared for, provided for, and led to safety and abundance. We place our trust in him and know he will not abandon us. Christ is the true, good shepherd who fulfills the loftiest model of love for the flock. He does not leave them nor forsake them even when trouble comes. He knows them intimately and cares for each one. He freely lays down his own life; no one takes it from him, but he lays down his life.

In open opposition to false shepherds, mere hirelings, Jesus presents himself as the true shepherd of the flock of sheep. In doing so, he draws on Israel's most common description of leadership: shepherding. Remember when young David was plucked from the fields to rule Israel? From that time forward, the king was called a shepherd of people. Some kings were good shepherds, leading with courage and faithfulness to God. Some were bad shepherds, using their position for self-gain and turning away from God. Others, like David himself, were more complicated. Priests were also called shepherds. Like the kings, some embodied good shepherding; some didn't. But the image of a leader as a good shepherd was always the ideal.

I think this is one reason Psalm 23 is such a beloved prayer. Presumably penned by the shepherd-king David, the prayer makes divine the royal and priestly image. Kings and priests have their place in our lives and their work to do, but the Lord is my shepherd.

The Lord is my shepherd. The Lord's shepherding heart provides completely all we need so that in God's care we do not want. The pastures are green, the waters are still; souls are restored. Dark valleys can be traversed; even death can be approached without fear; heads are anointed, cups overflow, tables are bountiful, and the front door of the house of God swings wide open for ever and ever and "welcome home" is always heard.

Jesus' vision of his ministry as Good Shepherd brings to mind all of these hopes that I actually do have a God who cares about me; that God will provide what I need; that I can live without fear even knowing there are some dark valleys in life. I need not fear death, for you are with me.

In the person of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, we contemplate the goodness and providence of God. God does not leave us on our own. The result of this contemplation of Jesus as true and good shepherd is the exclamation in 1 John 3: "See what love the Father has given us." It is the purest love, a surprising and mysterious love. By giving us Jesus as Good Shepherd who gives his life for us, the Father has given us the greatest and most precious gift He could give us. Before this love of God, we feel immense joy, and we open ourselves to recognizing how much we have freely received. <http://www.popefrancishomilies.com/john/chapter-1-10>

To finally say, "I shall not want" is to say, "I want nothing other than to be in your compassionate care, to know you fully, completely, and to be enveloped by divine love." Jesus' vision for his ministry is that all the world would know and be drawn to God's love through him. He knows the cost: "I lay down my life." He knows the promise: "I lay down my life and have the power to take it up again." The price is suffering and death but the promise is life forevermore. With this knowledge, he can express his expansive, ongoing shepherding vision, "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."

Jesus' vision for the community of faith under his shepherding care is a sprawling community of love, a community of one-ness in him. Words like unity, solidarity, sharing, common, communion, community all draw near as friends. The Apostle Paul shares in this calling, reminding us of our participation in Christ's ongoing ministry. He writes, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4:1-6)

In John 17, Jesus prays that his disciples may be one even as "I am one with the Father." His vision is a theological vision, a trinitarian vision of divinely graced unity amongst the diversity of his universal church, as God as one: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Its not hard to recognize the sheer audacity of this vision. Or its naivete.

We're so fractured. Torn as insufferably consumptive humans from the community of creation; broken apart from one another by race and resentment, entrenched prejudices and outright hatreds. Distanced from old friends and old loves by old, open wounds that go unhealed. All of this is plain. What is less obvious though no less true, is that few people even feel whole within themselves. They feel torn between who they thought they would be and who they are; between what others think about them and what they wish others thought about them; who they should be and who they keep being. Minds and hearts and bodies can seem like they inhabit worlds apart even within one solitary person. Did you think you were the only one who felt that way? Where does one Lord, one faith, one baptism really begin? On the global scale of

reconciliation with all creation or the intimately personal scale of unifying the shattered mosaic of an individual self? Goodness . . . one flock, one shepherd? Audacious in modern life.

But audacious then, too. Maybe that's why the first reaction of people who heard all this was to say, "You're insane. You're out of his mind." And no wonder: one flock, one shepherd. They knew all about would-be rulers who promised to unify the people only to discover the limits of their power to enforce or inspire unity of thought or purpose. They were legion in their religious and political factions. You know some of the names: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Herodians. Only Rome could bring them all together and only then by force and threat of annihilation. Which is not unity of purpose that leads to love; it is fear born of simmering anger and resentment. Those are two very different things.

Even Jesus' 12 disciples didn't always get along. Famously, there's Judas who betrayed him, and Peter who denied him, but beyond them were other fissures as well. There were times that if you'd left these 12 on a desert island for a little while, you would come back to find 12 churches built for each new denomination they would have started.

Long before them were the sons of Jacob, which ended with one of them tossed into a pit and then sold into slavery. Before them was Jacob and Esau who could just not get along; before them was Cain and Abel. The first murder in the world was fratricide.

In the face all of this humanity, Jesus is relentlessly undeterred. Psalm 23 says *goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*. The word there is better translated *pursue*--pursue me, not follow me. Goodness and mercy shall pursue me. The divine vision of goodness and mercy pursues us like shepherds herding the flock toward the Shepherd's direction.

Jesus envisions one flock tended by one shepherd. It was as unlikely then as it is today. Yet, Jesus still offers invitation to share in this grand vision. This grand, healing, hopeful vision. And as grand as is the vision so is the challenge, to live into it—to pursue and be pursued by wholeness and friendship; hospitality and unity. To seek love amongst friends, amongst neighbors, amongst strangers, and even amongst enemies. The only path to this, or at least the only path Jesus gives—is a costly one.

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. John's letter makes this love explicit—sharing our goods and lives with one another, loving not just in word or deed but in truth and action. For the sheep of this Shepherd, this is not a path of guilt for what you cannot yet do, but it is a path of joy, discovering that in each step in this journey, the joy leads toward love. And that love leads to a prayer we share with him in faith—that there may be one flock, one shepherd. And that we may say, in faith, by grace, Jesus, my Good Shepherd. And a reminder, there are other sheep to be brought in and the Shepherd is always on the move.

God is still on the move, bending down, picking up all the broken pieces. Still looking in the crags and cracks, the valleys and caves, the lonely corners and forgotten places and prison cells, still on the search for sheep to bring into his flock. God is still on the move and is not done yet.

The Good Shepherd goes on. Keep your eyes fixed on the hem of his robe—that is where the healing happens. Keep your eyes fixed on his feet; they will lead you faithfully. Keep your eyes on his rod, his staff; they will comfort you. He will not let you down. Follow him wherever he leads.

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