



**Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush on April 21, 2024**

**Text: John 10:11-18**

### **Risking It All for the Flock**

A few words can make all the difference in the world – as we shall see in this passage from John 10. Jesus offered an extended parable about the nature of faithful relationships, using a metaphor about shepherds and sheep. He starts out by saying “I am the good shepherd.” The first two words are significant. They echo all the way back to the book of Exodus when Moses asked for God’s name and God replied, “I am who I am.” Seven times in John’s gospel Jesus intentionally uses those same words to connect himself to the God of Sarah and Abraham, describing who he is by saying, “I am”: I am the bread of life; I am the vine; I am the light of the world; I am the resurrection and the life. Here in John 10 Jesus says “I am” again – I am the shepherd, the one to lead and guide you.

But Jesus doesn’t just claim to be a shepherd for the people. He puts an adjective in front of this announcement and says, “I am the good shepherd.” Which begs another question altogether: What is good? If you do something efficiently, someone might say to you “Good job.” If you run a business and earn a lot of money for shareholders, someone may call you a “good manager.” You can win an award or become famous and people will compliment you as being good at your career. But all those are extrinsic rewards – something that comes to you because you were good in some skill. The bible tends to talk about a person’s goodness in terms of intrinsic rewards – something that is good for its own sake, not because of fame or money or other rewards.

Years ago I remember reading in the book Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil about a rich woman named Big Emma, who was the largest shareholder in the Bank of Savannah. One day she was asked to come by the bank to sign some papers. She called ahead and told the bank’s trust officer to meet her with the papers by the curb in front of the bank as she was in a hurry and didn’t want to be kept waiting. Twenty minutes later, Big Emma turned onto Johnson Square, but she told her chauffeur not to come to a complete stop. The trust officer trotted alongside the limousine, handing papers through the window, pleading “For heaven’s sake, Emma, stop the car!” But she kept gliding along at about six or seven miles an hour, scribbling on the papers and handing them back, one by one, until they’d made a complete circuit around Johnson Square. As she handed the last document back to the bank officer, she rolled up her window, and sped off.<sup>1</sup> Now Emma may have been “good” in terms of efficiency, but she certainly wasn’t “good” in terms of showing human kindness to others.

When the bible speaks of goodness, it is speaking about intrinsic goods – good that is done for its own sake. But it goes further than that. This type of goodness routinely prioritizes the needs of others over our own needs and welfare. That is why Jesus made

a distinction between the hired hand watching the sheep and the good shepherd protecting the sheep. When danger comes, the hired hands run away. Self-preservation is their motivation. But in those same moments of peril, the good shepherd protects the flock. Goodness (as a spiritual virtue) involves risking oneself for the well-being of others.

Let's talk about this idea of "risking oneself" for a moment. A firefighter running into a burning building is literally risking him- or herself for the well-being of others. A doctor in a war zone, or as we saw recently, cooks associated with World Central Kitchen providing meals for starving Gazans put their lives at risk to do humanitarian work for others. When John 10, verse 15 is translated into English, it has Jesus say "I lay down my life for the sheep." And that he did, laying down his life, enduring the cross on Good Friday on our behalf. But we can't just read this passage as a one-time event only applicable to Christ. The Greek text can also be translated as "I risked my life, I put my life in my hands" for the sheep – and suddenly the work of the Good Shepherd isn't just limited to Jesus' singular act long ago, but comes back full circle to each of us today.

There is more here than just a discussion about Jesus' sacrificial death 2000 years ago. That is because of what is contained in verses 15 and 16. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, first names how he risks his life, lays down his life, for the sake of the sheep – the children of God he loves and redeems. But then he adds a few more words. He goes on to say this: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also...so there will be one flock, one shepherd." He risked it all for other sheep, for those outside the immediate circle of Jesus' followers.

Bible scholars point out that Jesus' first disciples were all Jewish and strong believers in a ritual purity that kept them separate from non-Jews – from Gentiles and Samaritans. But by the time John's gospel was being written, the church contained both Jews and Greeks, people raised on the laws of Moses and people who converted from other religions. Jesus' words about coming to serve and to save "other sheep" from outside the fold were seen as a prediction of this expansion of the Christian faith to include Jews and Gentiles alike.

But we don't just read the scriptures as ancient documents describing events that happened 2000 years ago. We see them as living documents applicable to our lives today. As Christians, we are called to follow Jesus' example. So it is to us that Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. My goodness is revealed in risking it all for others – not just for those in my flock, in my immediate circle, my community of likeminded souls. There are others that don't belong to this particular fold. I came for them as well. My death and resurrection and promise of newness of life are for all my sheep."

I want to illustrate how Christ's perspective on all this actually plays out in real life. This is just one example, but it involves three young men: Frank Baker, Shepard

Mallory, and James Townsend. It was May 23, 1861. The Civil War was only about a month old and Baker, Mallory and Townsend were slaves given an assignment to help build an artillery emplacement across the harbor from Fort Monroe, a small Union fortress in southeast Virginia. Life was hard for these three men, but it was about to get harder when they heard their master intended to send them even farther from home to help build a Confederate fort in North Carolina. So on May 23, the three men stole a rowboat, rowed across the harbor and sought asylum from the Union commander at Ft. Monroe - a balding, jowly, bullfrog of a man named Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler.

Butler had only arrived at the fort a day before. He was busy writing an initial report about the fort's conditions when the three fugitives were brought to him. Butler was in a quandary. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 said that runaway slaves had to be returned, but his fort was staffed by abolitionist volunteers from New England. How would his new command be received if his first act was to send back three runaway slaves? Butler didn't have long to decide. At the fort's front gate appeared Major John Cary, a tall Southern officer who was there to demand that the slaves be returned.

Now Butler had only been a soldier for four weeks. Prior to that he was a lawyer, which in this case came in handy. When Cary asked for the three men, Butler replied that he intended to hold them. Looking the Southern officer in the eye, Butler said, "I intend to take Virginia at its word. As they have seceded from the Union, I am under no constitutional obligation to return slaves under the laws of the Union. I am holding these men as contraband of war, since they are claimed as your property and were engaged in building a battery to be used against us."

In Butler's improvised, lawyerly retort, suddenly the humanity of Baker, Mallory and Townsend was proclaimed. Their right to freedom, to self-determination, to protection under the law was suddenly being upheld in a nation too long committed to slavery and too prone to rejecting "other sheep" outside the dominant racial flock. As news of Butler's action spread, two days later eight more fugitive slaves turned up at the fort's gates. The next day 47 slaves were there - men, women, children, entire families. Within a month, 500 slaves arrived, working with shovels and helping the garrison in any way possible. Over the coming months, thousands of slaves found refuge in Union outposts, refuting the Southern lie that slaves were less than human beings and challenging the Northern prejudicial fear that freed slaves would rise up and indiscriminately slaughter white masters in the North and South. The bravery of those three men and Butler's openness to see these "other sheep" with fresh eyes made all the difference in the world.<sup>2</sup>

How often have moments like this been repeated in history? Think of Sojourner Truth interrupting a Women's Rights Convention with her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. Think of the Sanitation Workers strike in Memphis, Tennessee in which Dr.

King and thousands of protestors marched with signs simply saying, "I am a man." Think of Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who endured a violent attack to speak up for the right of women to be educated. Think of the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty about how this nation extends an offer to the tired, huddled masses to find a home on these shores, and yet how the global climate crisis and xenophobic national political crisis conspire to undermine this longstanding American invitation.

On this Sunday in the season of Eastertide, we hear how Jesus defined what is good by his own life and actions. He took on the title of "shepherd," and unlike mere hired hands, he was willing to risk it all for the sake of his flock. But instead of defining narrowly who can benefit from his goodness and sacrificial love, Jesus went a step further, naming the other sheep who are also part of his flock. For 2000 years we've been challenged to see the world through Christ's eyes, to proclaim a gospel expansive enough to welcome all, and to live out a faith that moves beyond categories of "us" and "them" because the risen Lord has insisted there is only one shepherd and one flock.

May we hear Jesus' parable with fresh ears – both about the good shepherd and about the other sheep in this flock he calls his own. Because it's very true: A few words can make all the difference in the world. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Berendt, Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil, p. 157.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Goodheart, "The Shrug That Made History," *New York Times Magazine*, April 3, 2011.