

The Good Shepherd (John 10:11-18)

On December 31, 1989, the *Chicago Tribune* printed a collection of the most dramatic photos of the decade that was about to pass into history. One photo, taken by Michael Fryer, captured a fireman and paramedic carrying a victim away from the scene of a tragic fire. Both were obviously overcome with grief.

The fire, which happened in Chicago five years earlier, had been thought to be routine. Until firefighters discovered the bodies of a mother and five children huddled in the kitchen of an apartment.

The photographer discovered that fire investigators had figured out that the mother could have escaped with one or two of the children, but apparently she couldn't decide which ones to leave behind. She chose instead to wait with all of them until the firefighters arrived. All six – the mother and five children – died of smoke inhalation. There are times when you just don't leave those you love.¹ Please pray with me.

Gracious and loving God, open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed. Help us to know you as the Good Shepherd – the True Shepherd. Through Christ Jesus you have revealed yourself to us. And so through Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

The image of shepherd is used frequently throughout the Old and New Testaments. Jesus portrayed as the Good Shepherd has been a significant metaphor in Christian imagery for more than two thousand years. From the Greek translation of John's gospel, the word "good" has a different meaning than we might normally understand. The word "good" as it is used in connection with the word "shepherd" is not intended to indicate a degree or level of quality – as in good, better, best. The Greek word *kalos* also has the meaning of "model" or "true." Perhaps a more accurate interpretation than of John's text in chapter ten would be to understand Jesus as the True Shepherd.

As the True Shepherd, Jesus becomes the point of reference for what constitutes the model shepherd in an image that is set by God, not by human beings. For this reason, the true or model shepherd is also the description of God as written in the Book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 34:11-16, God is defined as being the good shepherd who cares for the sheep in a way that goes well beyond just tending the flock. The good shepherd cares for the sheep by rescuing them from the places to which they have been scattered, by feeding them, by looking after the weakest, by doctoring the injured, finding the lost, and protecting the flock from the hungry wolves. All these things, these characteristics of the good shepherd, are characteristics of God – a part of who God is. The tasks of the good shepherd are done regardless of

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the cost to the shepherd. So the image of shepherd is a metaphor for God's unconditional love for us, love that is freely given with nothing expected in return.

From John's perspective – and Ezekiel's – the good shepherd behaves more like the owner of the flock, and not just one hired to tend the flock. The good shepherd will lay down his life for any one or all of the sheep. He will never leave them, no matter what the circumstance, like the mother of those five children.

It's important to note that Jesus says he lays down his life for *the* sheep, not only *his* sheep, just as he speaks of giving his life for *the* world. His sacrificial love is an inclusive gift. The gift is not exclusive. Christ Jesus makes the love of God fully available to the entire world.

When Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd he becomes the fulfillment of God's promise of unconditional love. In identifying himself as the good shepherd, Jesus makes known his divinity. The Good Shepherd is actually God in the flesh.

Just as John's gospel goes beyond the more traditional understanding of "good," it also extends the metaphor beyond the idea of the shepherd as a spiritual leader. If we look at the four verses preceding the gospel reading this morning, we see that Jesus is not only the shepherd to the sheep but he is also the "gate" for the sheep. Once again, the word "good" translated from the Greek word *kalos*, extends the image of Jesus as the "gate" or the "way" to God.

To speak of Jesus as the good shepherd without the parallel image of the gate is to conform to that more traditional role that the church has

placed upon Jesus as one who tends the flock – the pastor who cares for the congregation. Without the gate imagery, the Parable of the Good Shepherd would seem to be about Christ and his relationship to us as a spiritual leader or pastor. But John's text goes beyond that relationship. The parable of the Good Shepherd is also about Christ and Christ's relationship to God.

The gate imagery is a metaphor for the way to God – to that greater love that we experience when we receive God's grace as unconditional. Jesus does more than tend the flock. He is the gateway to God. This establishes clearly what we as Christians have believed for two thousand years – Christ is the way to God. It's through this gate – Christ Jesus – that God is revealed to us. In Christ Jesus we see God revealed to us for the first time. It's through Christ Jesus that we are lifted up onto that higher plane of God's love – unconditional love that is freely given regardless of the cost.

God stays with us just as the good shepherd stays with the flock, no matter what the personal cost might be. God stays with us just as that mother stayed with her five children. God stays with us no matter what the personal cost might be – even the life of God's only son. This is God's unconditional love for us, the love that stays with us, and the love that abides in us. Think about what it takes to lay down one's life for another as the Jesus has laid down his life for us. Can you imagine a more powerful act of love than that? Then think about what it takes for a mother to lay down her life for her children. Would any of us ever sacrifice our lives as Jesus did? Would any of us ever sacrifice our lives for another – like our children, another family member or a friend?

The True Shepherd gave his life so that we might have new life. It is the True Shepherd that lifts us up to that greater love – unconditional love. The True Shepherd, like the mother of those children, will never leave us, but abides in us always. That is how much God loves you. God gave the world his only son so that we would know that unconditional love, so that we would have eternal life. That is the nature of the True Shepherd.