

Message for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year B (4/25/2021)  
John 10:11-18

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is both familiar and unfamiliar to us.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd is familiar because he's been ingrained in the popular Christian imagination through our repeated reading of the Gospels and our exposure to religious art. He's so well-known, in fact, that it may be hard to hear today's Gospel apart from our preconceived notions of rural life in first-century Palestine, bucolic and carefree. Other than the gentle Lord with a cute lamb resting on his shoulders, what more is there to it?

But, Jesus as the Good Shepherd is unfamiliar in the sense that most of us have little to no understanding of what shepherding is actually like. Even those with a background in ranching today are less knowledgeable about the practices of animal husbandry in the Ancient Near East.

So, for reasons of both familiarity and unfamiliarity, Jesus as the Good Shepherd is elusive. How can we approximate the meaning of the metaphor in our Gospel from John today so that it resonates with us the way that it might have resonated with John's original audience? **How might Jesus' promise travel across time and space to meet us where we are?**

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." The core of the shepherd metaphor is the fact of knowing and being known, and that's something we can understand.

Unlike the hired hand, whose interest in tending the sheep is transactional and ultimately self-serving, **the good, or model, shepherd cares for the sheep because he *knows* them. This kind of knowing is not a matter of agricultural experience and acumen; it's not cerebral, but relational. It means that shepherd and sheep recognize and belong to each other in an intimate way;<sup>1</sup> it implies an enduring attachment and loving care.**

The closest parallel I can draw is the relationship that's developed between our elder child, Alex, and her beloved chickens, Olive, Lemon, and Blueberry. You may have picked up a new hobby or read a few books during the pandemic; our family adopted three chicks. As they've grown to adulthood, I've had the privilege of watching Alex take them under her proverbial wing, become preoccupied with their well-being, and love them like a parent. In fact, she insists that we refer to her as the chickens' mother; my spouse, Bethany, gets to be their aunt. Alex has become so close to the chickens and they to her that she'll scoop one of them up in her arms without hesitation and the bird will come to rest there as comfortably as any skittish chicken can.

Alex is the good, or model, mother of chickens because she *knows* them and they know her, just as her parents know her and she knows us.

Incidentally, Alex was outside in the yard when I asked her for permission to tell her story in the sermon today. She said yes, and as I walked away, I heard her tell the chickens, "You're gonna be famous!"

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen A. Cooper, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 2, 448.

The promise that the Good Shepherd knows the sheep and that we know him, the promise that we belong to each other, is a blessed assurance. **We may strain to make out his voice through the clamor of our doubts and fears, but he calls us ever back to him, that he might lead us even through the valley of the shadow of death to green pastures and still waters.**

**What's more, he calls us ever together, to come to know one another as he knows us.** To quote Parker Palmer, "A knowledge that springs from love will implicate us in the web of life; it will wrap the knower and the known in compassion, in a bond of awesome responsibility as well as transforming joy; it will call us to involvement, mutuality, accountability."<sup>2</sup>

"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold," the Good Shepherd insists. **If his is an intimate kind of knowing, it's also inclusive, ever widening for the sake of abundant life.** And thus, it's a provocation to those of us who consider ourselves part of the fold already. Who are the "others" whom the Good Shepherd knows and loves? How might we come to know them, too, to become involved with them, to become accountable to them, so that they are no longer others, so that we become "one flock"?

This Earth Day weekend, I'm mindful of the ways human beings have distanced ourselves from other species on account of our ingenuity and self-centeredness. But, we humans are creatures, too, formed from the dust of the ground and granted life by grace alone, just like our nonhuman neighbors. If we

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<sup>2</sup> *To Know as We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey.*

are set apart from other species, it's in order that we take up our proper role as caretakers, stewards of all that God has made.<sup>3</sup> Ellen Davis writes, "The whole created world is longing for Homo sapiens, the creature that dares to call itself 'wise,' to become fully human."<sup>4</sup> **We are meant to *know* the world around us, and to know our place within it.**

To know and be known – that is the life of faith, friends. Who we are can never be separated from who the Good Shepherd is for us and for the world.<sup>5</sup> **Our belonging in the fold is by grace, and by grace we come to know others for whom he lays down his life. That we are all one flock is a mystery bound up in God, yet a mystery that will continue to unfold as we lay down our lives for one another.**

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:7, 15.

<sup>4</sup> As cited by Patricia K. Tull, in *Inhabiting Eden*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Gail R. O'Day, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 673.