

How To Be Like The Good Shepherd

Jesus is our Master,... our Teacher,... our Good Shepherd.

All of my life I've lived in a city – the first half in the East Bay, in Fremont, CA, and the second half in Patterson, in the Central Valley – which though in a rural setting surrounded by farms – it is still a city in the parts that I visited regularly. Though I know some farmers and ranchers – I do not know their way of life. I would venture to say most people in society today are like me in that respect, maybe not in the Central Valley, or even in Fort Bragg – but certainly most of America's citizens.

Most of you may know that I served as a Lay Pastor in the small rural community of Farmington in the heart of the Central Valley. One Friday morning, on our way to the church, Nancy and I passed a flock of sheep and their little lambs. All I know about these animals is what I've experienced at petting zoos.

So how does this image make sense for us today, for people who see sheep only on Christmas cards and have never known a shepherd? Bishop Robert Rimbo of the Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church says we are reminded that the shepherd beyond all shepherds is Jesus. What is the main characteristic of this Good Shepherd?

Care. See, God could have easily left us to ourselves. But God is perfect love and love desires intimacy with that which you love.

So God took on our flesh, grew in it, faced temptation in it, and died in it—in the most unique act of love in human history.

Bishop Rimbo wrote that this good shepherd, Jesus, “cares for all the flock, for you and me, for each unique and unrepeatable individual called to live in this shepherd’s flock forever. **This** shepherd calls us by name, knows us more intimately than we know ourselves, knows that it’s tough being a creature of flesh and blood and spirit and intelligence and freedom. And no matter how far we stray, **this** shepherd will track us down, cradle us and gently bring us home.”

I desire to be like this Good Shepherd. Thankfully, our scriptures give us a hint at how we can be like Jesus. It begins in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 7:

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard- hearted or tight- fisted toward your needy neighbor.

In our New Testament, in James 2:15-16:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

In today's Gospel reading of the Good Shepherd we find Jesus meditating on his death and resurrection. During this time, Jesus was in Jerusalem being scrutinized by the Pharisees and other leaders. Here he contrasts himself as the good shepherd with the hired hands – perhaps a subtle way of judging the false leaders who use the sheep for their own gain?

The good shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, whereas the hired hands run away.

For the good shepherd – unlike the hired hands – tending the flock is his reason for being and dying. The good shepherd knows his flock intimately – that means there are no strangers in the flock, none who should feel that he or she is unrecognized by the shepherd.

In verse 16, Jesus says something interesting, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” Who are they? Are they other Jewish Christian communities? Are they Gentiles from other lands? Or, perhaps they are later generations like us? It is hard to tell what Jesus meant, but his flock is apparently open ended.

Jesus also points out that he is laying down his life willingly. His life is not taken from him, but he lays it down of his own accord **and** that he has the power to take it up again. The text may be implying that the power of resurrection comes from a free self-giving, that self-surrender is the way to life when one follows the commands of God the Father?

In essence, freedom does not demand random self-choosing, but is rooted in the divine will. This may be why Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

In John 15:12-17 Jesus says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. **You** are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you **everything** that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

If you want to be like the good shepherd, then love our Father God freely and one another unconditionally and one day you will hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Benediction

Friends, may the blessings of God warm you like the sun.

May the love of Christ wash over you like a gentle rain.

May the joy of the Spirit raise you to new heights like an eagle soaring. Amen.