

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/21/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

**Fourth Sunday of Easter**

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, April 21st

**John 10:11-18**

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### Good shepherds or hired hands?

The Gospel lection for the Fourth Sunday of Easter and the previous verses (1-10) present two contrasting models of leadership. Jesus is using figures of speech (v.6) to describe the community as a sheepfold and its leaders as either shepherds or thieves, robbers, strangers, hired hands. In language and imagery immediately familiar to the original audience of this Gospel, Jesus is presented as the Good Shepherd who will lay down His life for the sheep. This passage has rich theological implications which add to our understanding of the Easter Jesus as well as very practical implications for leadership in the church today in such a changing world.

#### John 10:11-18 Commentary

As context, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees (v.9:40) – the very people who will ultimately have Him killed. The controversy with the Pharisees began because of Jesus giving sight to a man born blind. The Pharisees refused to believe in the miracle and attempt to discredit Jesus. The formerly blind man is cast out by the Pharisees because of his testimony (9:1-34). When Jesus finds the formerly blind man again, He blesses Him with spiritual insight, and this precipitates a discourse on the spiritual blindness of Israel's leaders who refuse to see (9:35-41). This whole section is itself bookended by two attempts to stone Jesus (8:59 and 10:31). While the main theme of this passage is Jesus as the Good Shepherd who will lay down His life for His sheep because He cares for them, the literary structure places the emphasis on vv.12-13 – He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd cares nothing for the sheep:

- A. The Good Shepherd (v.11)
- B. The hired hand (vv.12-13) ← Main Point
- A'. The Good Shepherd (vv.14-18)

<sup>11</sup> *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*

This is one of the seven main "*I am*" (*ego eimi*) statements in John that reveal Jesus' true identity. The "*I am*" is a reference to the "*I AM*" of Exodus 3:14 - God's "name" revealed to Moses. When Jesus applies "*ego eimi*" to Himself, he is declaring that He is God. Good Shepherd refers to the biblical ideal of the shepherd. The shepherd had responsibility to protect the flock. Amos speaks about the shepherd having to rescue parts of a sheep out of a lion's mouth (Amos 4:12). A shepherd had to bring back parts of a sheep as evidence that a sheep had died and

that he could not have prevented its death (Exodus 22:13). David as a shepherd boy slew a lion to protect the sheep (1 Samuel 17:35-36). A good shepherd would literally have to be willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

*<sup>12</sup> He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.*

The hired hand is more concerned with the reward than with the welfare of the sheep. The contrast here is between a shepherd as a vocation and calling versus a means to make money. There were different expectations for shepherds and hired hands when it came to putting their life at risk. The Pharisees had just demonstrated how they cared nothing for the man who was born blind and were more concerned with maintaining their own status as leaders (9:1-41). There are also allusions here to Ezekiel 34 and the prophecy against the faithless shepherds of Israel who feed themselves rather than the flock.

*<sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

The contrast continues. To the hired hand, the sheep are a means to a paycheck. The shepherd, however, intimately knows the sheep. “*Ginosko*” (*know*) indicates more than superficial knowledge - such as knowing which sheep are part of the flock. It indicates experiential knowledge – a relationship. Here, the relationship between God and Jesus, a key emphasis in John’s Gospel, is compared to the relationship that Jesus has with His disciples. The love Jesus has for God and His disciples causes Him to lay down His life for His sheep.

*<sup>16</sup> And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Sometimes a fold would contain flocks belonging to more than one shepherd. In the morning, the shepherds in turn would call to their sheep and the sheep would follow their respective shepherds out of the fold. The metaphor of sheep, flocks, and folds has several interpretations. Some argue the sheep of different folds refer to the Gentiles.

*<sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

Jesus explains how He is not a reluctant martyr but a willing Savior carrying out the mission He was given from the Father. While the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders plotted to end Jesus’ life, they never had the power to take it – He gave it up willingly.

### Reflection and Application

As we ponder the Risen Christ during the Easter season, this passage brings us back to fundamental questions about the church today. First, the idea of the church being as sheep in many folds is still an accurate and vivid metaphor. Today, denominational, national, racial, educational, political, financial, and other barriers exist within the flock. The Church is in many folds. Regardless of these barriers, we are all one flock and share the same Good Shepherd. While there are many differences between us, we all know our Shepherd’s voice. The many different expressions of Christianity in the world today support the mission of the Church to the whole world. No one expression is sufficient for every time and place. The work of the Good Shepherd continues through us. While Christians have been reconciled to God through Jesus, many in the various folds of the Church must still be reconciled with each other.

To continue with the sheep analogy, where I grew up in England, there are often many flocks grazing on the same pasture (evidenced by their different color markings). In the same way, there are many different local churches in existence around us. Many of these churches act as isolated flocks, often in declining numbers, yet the people of these churches are all intermingled within the same community, often not realizing they have the same shepherd. How has this impacted community development? The recent pandemic made it quite clear that we are all dependent upon one another and how many individual churches were challenged to look after their own fold, let alone their local communities. We often talk about church planting but what about the whole community development? Perhaps this speaks to the need for a parish mindset rather than a franchise mindset.

A second point of reflection from this passage applies to all those who are called as pastoral leaders – as shepherds to the flock. At one end of the continuum there is the model that Christ provided – the Good Shepherd who was willing to lay down His life for His flock. At the other end of the spectrum is the model of the hired hand revealed by the actions of the Pharisees in Jesus' day – those who were willing to use the flock as a means of status, livelihood, and a continuation of tradition and political affiliation. As certain models of church and funding mechanisms come to the end of an approximate 150-year lifecycle, what model will emerge to replace a system that seemed to rely heavily on hired hands?

