

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Epiphany**  
**January 29, 2012**

John 10:11-18 "Which Shepherd Do You Follow? The Good One? Or the Other One?"

Jesus says to us today, "I am the Good Shepherd." Of course, he's not talking about shepherding sheep at all. He's talking about shepherding people. Whenever we are in a position to follow the lead of someone else, we are allowing him or her to become our shepherd. Or stated in another way regarding our own leadership, when someone else is in the position of following us, we become their shepherd.

It's kind of like the game, "Follow the leader." If the leader wants us to jump up and down, we will jump up and down. If the leader wants us to follow him or her around the room, we will follow the leader. If the leader wants us to touch our toes, we will touch our toes (or at least try to!). If the leader leads us in jumping off a cliff... (Well...we need to make the decision whether we will blindly follow the leader or thoughtfully analyze the situation and realize he or she is not being a good leader for us.) So, also, if a friend, a co-worker, or our own judgment is leading us to do something that goes against the 10 Commandments, violates ethical, Biblical principles, or is going to hurt us or someone else (physically, emotionally, or spiritually), we need to stop and evaluate what kind of leader, or shepherd, we are following, or what kind of shepherd are we being for others.

So we have a question put before us today. "Which shepherd do you follow? The Good One? Or the other one?" Do you follow the shepherd who gives life, or do you follow the shepherd that leads to death? Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Who is the shepherd of your life?

Last week we heard that "Jesus is the door for the sheep," which means that there is only one way to God. Jesus Christ is the Door for the sheep. Anyone who tries to get to God and heaven without going through Jesus is like a thief or a robber. He or she rejects God's grace in Jesus Christ. Jesus says that the Pharisees of his time were such "thieves and robbers." They were looking for another way to get into God's kingdom apart from Jesus, and they were teaching others to do the same. They relied on their own self-righteousness. They defined their relationship to God on the basis on their own moral obedience to the written and oral laws passed down from Moses. They were so perfected by the law in their own minds they were the only ones who could measure up before God. Not only did they rely on their self-righteousness to put them into a good relationship with God, they taught others to rely on the same.

However, they were perfect only in their own minds. It is impossible to please God as if our obedience to the rules we define are sufficient to bring us to God. The law shows us our sin. We cannot completely and perfectly fulfill the law's demands. Our sin separates us from God, and we stand condemned by it. To rely on that which brings judgment and death is to tread in dangerous territory. This is what the Pharisees were doing for themselves and the others they led. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was offering them life, but they refused to come to God on Christ's terms.

We are to follow the Good Shepherd, but there are other shepherds in life that call for our attention and to follow them. When we belong to the Good Shepherd's flock, we are warned not to listen to these other voices. However, sometimes we do listen and believe what they say. Both young people and adults will listen to the voices of their peers and follow the leader, even if what is proposed is contrary to what they learned from the Bible. We can casually be led to believe that basic Biblical teachings about creation, the sanctity of life, and the 10 Commandments don't matter when it comes to what science and society teach. We can be led to believe that when it comes to "loving one's neighbor as oneself," it doesn't apply to the work place, the political sphere, or anywhere outside of the church. We can fall into the trap of following the hired hand rather than the voice of the Good Shepherd. In the end, the other shepherds in life really don't care for us and our spiritual welfare. They do not help us when, instead of leading us closer to God, they lead us further away and to judgment.

Unprotected and left to themselves, the sheep die. False teachers rob people of God's grace in Christ by their erroneous teachings. They lead people to believe that what the Bible teaches doesn't matter, or that it is something that you can leave at home or at church. They teach us to rely on ourselves, to find the power within, or to find a spiritual guide in

life – apart from Christ and the church – that can help us navigate temptation, sickness, and death. They lead people further and further away from Christ and to spiritual death, because they really don't care about the sheep. They have so thoroughly convinced themselves of the lie in their own minds that they want us to place our confidence in false hopes, in self-righteousness, and in idolatry. These other shepherds lead people to spiritual death, and ultimately to eternal death away from the presence of God.

Jesus says to us today, "I am the Good Shepherd." Jesus, the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Jesus willingly came into our world to face death because he loves you and me. Even before death came into the world through Adam and Eve's disobedience, God already had a plan in place. His own Son would take our human flesh and blood and become our Savior and Good Shepherd to lead us back to God. The way for us back to God is through Jesus' death. Jesus knew that his own death was part of the divine plan, and he was willing to come into our life and face death for his sheep.

God expects us to keep the commandments perfectly, but because we cannot, it only gives us death – spiritually and eternally away from God and heaven if we die in unbelief of Jesus. Sin is violation of the commandments, and it is like a disease that holds on to us through life and will not let us go. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and after he completely kept the 10 Commandments that we could not, he went to the cross, took our sins upon himself, and received the punishment from God that we deserve for our sins. He was punished for our sins as our substitute. Jesus satisfied death's demand for blood by shedding his own innocent blood for us at the cross, and so he completely paid the debt we owed because of our sin. When the sacrifice was complete, the Good Shepherd died for his sheep.

After Jesus, our Good Shepherd, passed through death and the grave for us, he took his life back again and rose from the dead. He ascended into heaven 40 days later because his work was complete, but since then we receive the benefits of his death and resurrection. Through faith in Jesus' work at the cross, we receive forgiveness of our sins. Furthermore, death no longer has power over us. We live with Christ through his resurrection from the dead. We are spiritually alive and made new creations through Jesus, and after this life we will live with Christ in heaven. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who loves us, lays down his life for us, and takes it back again so that we can live with him forever.

Jesus continues to gather his flock today through his Word and Sacraments. He says in the Gospel reading today:

*<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.*

It's sad that there are so many divisions in the Christian Church today through the many denominations and non-denominational churches. These divisions are a sign of the sin that continues to trouble Christians, including the church. It reminds us that the devil is still active and seeks to destroy our faith in Christ and the Christian Church. However, Jesus did not go to the cross to form many churches, but one church. He is the Good Shepherd who has one flock, and he has provided the message of Christ in order to gather people to himself. The voice of Christ is the message about Christ that tells us that through the cross our sins are forgiven, death is the gate to heaven and eternal life, and we live already now as new creations through Christ. We are the voices of our Good Shepherd when we faithfully speak his message to others who still need to learn about his saving love. When they listen and believe, Jesus brings them, with us, into his flock so that they can be one with us in this Christian Church.

There are many shepherds in this life who are speaking to us every day. They want us to follow their voice, and sometimes they can lead people to destruction or into sin. However, there is only one shepherd who loved us enough to give himself into death so that we can have life. That is the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, our Lord. "Which shepherd do you follow? The Good One? Or the other one?"

*soli deo gloria*