

“The Good Shepherd”**John 10: 11-18****May 7, 2006**

Many years ago, when I was a child, we used to sometimes attend First Christian Church in Junction City, Oregon. I remember a painting that hung on the Sunday school wall—a painting of Jesus holding a lamb. I liked that painting. I also remember pasting little sheep onto a pastoral background and then pasting on the shepherd. The paste was always a winner back then. Except for a mishap with some sheep that chased a friend and I as we took a short cut across a farmer’s field---that about sums up my experience with sheep. I have never known a shepherd---only seen pictures of shepherds. I know very little about sheep.

Yet, the shepherd image—at least on one level---is a familiar image to us. This is due in part to things like the 23rd Psalm or to passages such as this one in the gospel of John---Jesus is the “good” shepherd.

In the time of Jesus people would have had a very different reaction to this image. In reality the reaction in the First century would have been mixed. The shepherd was an honorable and high vocation through much of Israel’s history. The great leaders were at one time shepherds---Moses, David, Amos, and others. Thus when the 23rd Psalm declared that the “Lord is my shepherd” most people would have had an instant positive emotional reaction.

By the time of Jesus that reaction was still emotional but not in the way we think. That was because the vocation of shepherd had changed. Over the centuries the job of being a shepherd had changed. Very often sheep owners

lived far from the pasture and hired people to watch the sheep. Over time the pay and benefits fell to the point that by the time of Jesus being a shepherd was one of the lowest vocations you could engage. We know of similar changes where jobs once valued shift and are not valued. What often happens is the quality of persons in the job deteriorates. In the time of Jesus the shepherds or “hirelings” were noted for their dishonesty, crass and rough natures, and everyone knew that in a crisis they would abandon the sheep to protect themselves. This is what makes the story in Luke of the shepherds being the only ones to be visited by angels and the only ones who honored the new born Jesus---that is what makes that story so radical and controversial. The decline in shepherding was why in the gospel of John Jesus qualifies the image of shepherd by saying he is a GOOD shepherd and is nothing like the hirelings that people would naturally associate with the term.

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Jesus declares that he is like a “good shepherd”. The Greek word translated for good—the word “**kalos**” means that a person is not only good, but the goodness has a quality of loveliness that makes it an attractive thing or person. William Barclay compares the phrase to a similar phrase we might use when we refer to someone as a “good” doctor. We might be thinking of the person’s skill as a doctor but we also most likely are thinking of the empathy and character of the doctor.¹

Jesus qualifies his definition by saying that a good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This is a different qualification from what one would expect. A

good shepherd might RISK their lives for the sheep in defending them from some danger or trying to rescue them from some predicament. Jesus goes beyond even good shepherding.

Jesus is the “devoted” shepherd or the good shepherd who “knows” his sheep and whose sheep know him. Knowing sheep and being known by sheep is something many of us who have animals understand. Many years ago I visited one of our members who ran a dairy farm. The husband and wife team took me out to see their herd. Each cow had a name and as they called each name the appropriate cow responded. The farmers knew the personalities, the temperament, and the appearance of all their cows. To me they all looked about the same. Jesus knows his sheep as God knows Jesus and as God knows the sheep.

Jesus also acknowledges that he has other sheep that were not part of the flock. He must go and bring them into the flock. We continue to debate what is meant by this. In the context of John’s gospel this is most likely a reference to the Gentiles who held a different religious tradition. Most Jews considered Gentiles far outside of God’s love. The indication is that Jesus works within the framework of the faith and outside the framework—beyond the fences---to reach others and bring them to God.

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I appreciate the image that John gives to us for Jesus. John shares several images of Jesus such as Jesus is the “light” of the world. Light is good especially if we are frightened by what might be in the darkness. All of us have

¹ Sermon Writer, www.lectionary.org/English/john/03-05-11,%20Easter%204B.

had times when we were frightened by the unknown and something as simple as turning on a light brought a sense of peace and calm.

Another image in the gospel of John is that Jesus is “the bread of life”. Once again bread is good and is necessary for our survival. Jesus gives to us what we need spiritually for life. The image of bread brings to mind all the wonderful meals we have shared, all the wonderful foods we have enjoyed--- Jesus is the bread of life.

Here in John the image is that Jesus is like a good shepherd. Jesus loves so deeply that he will give his life for the sheep, Jesus loves so completely that he knows each lamb by name, and loves so universally that he will leave the fenced area to search for other sheep to bring to God. This is an image that brings positive feelings, warm feelings of love and comfort. It is summed up in the hymn, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus!”

This image is in contrast to another image of Jesus that many today are advocating. Behind some of the popular Christian rhetoric and action are not an image of a loving, peaceful, Christ but the image of a harsh, warlike Christ.

There have been other times that such an image has risen to the forefront. The image comes from a misunderstanding of the Book of Revelation. The image comes by an assumption that the figure depicted in Revelation 19: 11-16 is Jesus and not a symbol of divine truth.² Rather than understanding the letter symbolically, some take literally the image of a warlike Jesus who returns at the head of an army. The image of a warlike, judgmental Jesus was prominent

² “Jesus the Righteous Warrior”, Wayne Jackson,
[http://print.christiancourier.com/article\\$page=1869&storyUrl=http](http://print.christiancourier.com/article$page=1869&storyUrl=http).

during the Crusades. Christians marched off to war in the Holy Lands believing that killing Muslims, including women and children, would gain them admission into heaven and would be pleasing to Jesus. One of the Crusades stopped and sacked the Christian city of Constantinople. They were the wrong kind of Christians.

During the Inquisition Jews and Christians were regularly tortured and put to death by other Christian religious leaders who believed that they were representing the righteous anger and action of Jesus. Jesus, in their view, did not tolerate unbelievers and they were only carrying out the will of God.

Today that image is again popular. Among the articles written about the subject is an article that appeared in 2004 in the New York Times and other places by David D. Kirkpatrick.³ Kirkpatrick references books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins that have made the warrior Jesus popular. Quoting from the book Glorious Appearing, authors LaHaye and Jenkins write, “Men and women soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin. Even as they struggled, their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted and their tongues disintegrated.”⁴ Kirkpatrick writes that “The image of a fearsome Jesus who will turn the tables on the unbelieving earthly authorities corresponds to a widespread sense among many conservative

³ Kirkpatrick, David D., “The Return of the Warrior Jesus”, New York Times, April 4, 2004, http://www.theocracywatch.org/jesus_times_apr4.04.htm.

⁴ Ibid.

Christians that their values are under assault in a culture war with the secular society around them.”⁵

In other popular books about the end Jesus is portrayed as having little remorse as he and his army of good slaughters the unbelievers. In scenes of judgment there is little of the shepherd who knows us by name as Jesus pronounces the fires of hell to those who have not followed his will. What is his will? Well there is no shortage of answers: all the way from the mode of baptism, to whether we have spoken in tongues, to whether we accept the bible literally, to whether we believe in a 6-day creation process, or to whether we believe that prosperity is a sign of God’s elect.⁶

This warlike image is in contrast to the image of Jesus presented in the Gospels and in the letters. A Jesus who instructs us to “turn the other cheek”, “to forgive the enemy”, “to go the second mile” and a Jesus who describes himself as a good shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep, who knows each one by name, and who is passionate about love. John begins his gospel by declaring that God’s love is so great that he sent his Son Jesus so that we might have life--life eternal.

The image we have of Jesus, of God, and of faith influences how we do ministry, how we relate to God and how we act toward other people in the world. The image here in John challenges us to be a model of ministry and life that at its heart and soul is sacrificial, loving,

⁵ Kirkpatrick, “The Return of the Warrior Jesus”, New York Times, April 4, 2004.

⁶ See also, Berkowitz, Bill, “The Rapture Racket”, [Conservative Watch](http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Feb2005/berkowitzpr0205.html), <http://zmagsite.zmag.org/Feb2005/berkowitzpr0205.html>, and Marty, Martin, “Rambo Jesus MEMO”, [Christian Century](#), May 4, 2004.

merciful, and passionate. Ministry in this model is pastoral not judgmental. Ministry in this model is personal not distant. Ministry in this model is love not hate covered by the words of love.

Intolerance is growing. Radical elements are taking hold in many of the great religions substituting the spirit of love with a spirit of hate. There is a possibility today of a great conflict between two of the great religions. Radical elements in both Christian and Islam believe that a global confrontation will bring in the great age of peace. And some are working hard to bring it about. Such tragic thinking might actually create the apocalyptic realities that will not reflect God but will reflect a misguided faith.

It is all about attitude. It is all about the image of Jesus we hold in our hearts. John presents an image that Jesus is the “good shepherd”. John challenges the church to model sacrificial leadership and loving compassion. This, John believes is what Jesus is all about and this John believes will change the world.