

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
April 30, 2023
John 10: 1-18

Our relationship to God is conveyed in different ways throughout scripture, resorting to different metaphors or corollaries, each seeking to evoke or leverage some aspect. Such as, sometimes the Lord is described as our sovereign, our king, and we his people or subjects. Sometimes the relationship is that of Teacher and student, or prophet and people, or parent and child, or Creator and creation. Sometimes as a friend. But this morning, the imagery and language of a shepherd is used, evoking an aspect of our relationship to God and to the Christ as being like a shepherd to their sheep, like a caretaker to animals that don't understand the dangers or how to meet their own needs fully, but the sheep know the voice and trust the voice of the shepherd, and when that listening and trusting relationship is in place, the shepherd can care for the sheep.

We are learning something of the satisfaction of such a relationship with our seven-month-old Malamute puppy. When we call him, he expects good, a treat, or to be petted or played with. When he comes to us, he expects that he will be greeted warmly. He responds to our voice, our tone of voice, can tell when we are praising him and when we are expecting him to stop being hyper and listen. And so, having enjoyed incorporating Fischer into our family, Jesus' words about a good shepherd and about sheep who know and trust the shepherd's voice, it evokes a warmth, invites us to consider Jesus' love and care for us and trustworthiness with a similar sense of comfort.

Now such likening of one thing to another is never a one for one. What I mean is that Jesus both evokes the metaphor of shepherd and sheep, and adapts and qualifies it, differentiates from normal expectations of such a relationship. For example, we are not commodities to Jesus. One doesn't raise sheep as mere pets. There is some economic factor, some gain to be had at the expense of the animal. We had animals growing up, such as the occasional cow or pigs, many chickens. And while we kids may have occasionally named such animals, there was an understanding to the relationship. That at some point they go from being cared for to being food in the freezer. It is a particular kind of caring relationship. So, there are aspects to the world of shepherding that are not being applied to our relationship with Christ.

So, when Jesus says that not only do the sheep come to know the voice, but that his voice can be trusted, he is veering away from typical ways of understanding the

shepherd sheep relationship. Jesus says he is the good shepherd who not only loves the sheep but lays down his life for the sheep. No shepherd, however good, sees their job as dying for a particular sheep.

You see, the hired hand or contracted shepherd was typically expected to return with about 85% of the flock, building in the factors of attrition and illness, a stealthy or fearsome predator, or the hunger of the shepherd while he is out in the steppe-land. They are sheep, a commodity. By claiming that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, Jesus casts himself as a unique shepherd. He does not accept losses, does not treat his followers as commodities, but as individuals who know his voice, and for whom he lays down his life to protect and redeem.

Now another aspect of the shepherd metaphor is that it was a common label or metaphor for a leader, including the king. Jesus takes it up as he seeks to lay claim to the tradition and the ability to reinterpret that tradition. He is competing with others, namely other religious leaders and aspiring political leaders, who claim to be shepherds of Israel, shepherds of God's people. Not unlike campaign talk in an election year, Jesus is taking up the standard metaphor for leadership in Israel and is turning the metaphor to convey something of himself and of his ministry. He expresses his vision of leadership and redemption and salvation where not only do his followers come to know his voice, but they can trust that voice.

Now the realities of political leadership, which being a shepherd of Israel inevitably invokes, brings certain impersonal aspects, a scale that starts to treat people as statistics. It is no longer about doing what is right for a particular person, but making trade-offs that benefit some sense of the whole. We see it in national and international politics all the time, we make decisions based on national interests, often economic or trade interests, an impersonal calculus which means that sometimes if people are starving or in the path of war, they may get help, or they may not, depending on how that calculus of larger interests plays out. And so, politicians make all kinds of warm promises, but we are familiar with the reality that little of it gets actualized, and rarely as initially conveyed.

How do you know which leader to trust, which person claiming to care for the sheep best, to be the true shepherd of God's people and purposes. How do you tell the shepherd from the thief trying to climb the fence of the sheepgate. "All who came before me are thieves and bandits," Jesus says. "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Jesus is evoking a sense of Shepherd that is not tied to the shepherd's own interests or mixed allegiances. In fact, he goes on to interweave the sheep's place in his heart and care to his own relationship to God the father, drifting towards trinitarian language. He says: "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. And I lay down my life for the sheep."

And this is where it starts to become clear that not only is Jesus trustworthy and caring and different from other leaders and shepherds that have come along, and is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, but he is also speaking of the relationship as if under ideal circumstances. For example, when he says, "All who came before me are thieves and bandits," he continues, "but the sheep did not listen to them." And it seems to me that the story of humanity before and after Christ is that they often did listen to them, that we *are* prone to listen to the wrong voices, we are prone to be led along and deceived by the thieves and the bandits, and too slow to recognize God's voice and that full and abundant life made available.

We have been enjoying our puppy Fischer, as I said earlier, and that experience of him responding to our voice and us responding to his invitations to play and so forth. But, it would be misleading to imply this is always the case. In fact, we cannot take him anywhere without him losing his mind. In fact, the trainer we took puppy classes from would comment that we are always retraining in different settings, circumstances, and variables.

So, it is one thing for him to be getting certain commands in the house, but you have to train for the same things in the backyard. And still again in the front yard, or on a walk, or out in the world with all its distractions. A new setting may feel like you are starting over. Just the other day, Holly and I had him walking alongside of us in the backyard, following at our pace, checking in, following commands. We then put the harness on him to go for a walk and headed towards the gate and a switch was thrown. He doesn't check in, he doesn't walk at our pace, struggles to listen to our voice, goes into all four sled-dog pulling mode. The circumstances change, variables added, a new context, new distractions and our voices become readily and thoroughly ignored.

So, while we Fischer knows our voices, and he demonstrates around the house and backyard that we are good owners and care for him, when he goes out the front door he stops listening to that voice, stops following the commands, and if it wasn't for a leash, God knows what.

Yes, under ideal circumstances, or in certain circumstances, the ideal seems to have some truth, Fischer listens to our voices, and responds to our care. Catch me taking him to the vet and you will assume I am an utter liar. And as much as Jesus portrays our relationship with him as knowing his voice and heeding his voice, and knowing it as distinct from other untrustworthy voices, how quickly under changing circumstances settings and distractions, how we forget it all, listening to the wrong voices, responding out of our own instincts and habits, distrusting and not heeding the wise voice, focused on everything in front of us and forgetting to even check-in.

And this is the pleading voice of God that we hear through the prophets and the psalms and through the voice of Jesus, pleading for us to listen and to heed God's voice. This is Jesus' prayer on the mount of olives, wanting to gather God's flock, gather God's people like a hen gathers her chicks but they would heed, to have God's people heed God's voice and to shape their relationship into that ideal potential. But, as Isaiah say, "all we, like sheep, have turned away, each to their own way." All we, like sheep, have heeded the wrong voices, following the thieves and bandits and hired-hands.

And so, it would come to the place where the shepherd could not just maintain the pen, could not just offer that trust-worthy voice that the sheep could hear and trust and respond to. But it would come to the place where the shepherd would have to lay down his life for the sheep.

And the call comes to us again, to hear the voice, to foster that shepherd-sheep relationship where we learn and trust and cooperate with the wisdom and care of the one who both knows us, and who can guide us towards our best interests, our best community, to that full and abundant life. We may have learned it at moments in our lives, in certain settings and under certain circumstances. But as time and circumstances and distractions and other voices all come into the picture, we have to continually learn anew how to listen, to check-in, to heed the voice of the one who calls to us.

Praise be to God, that we have a good shepherd. In the midst of the things that catch our attention, that draw our energy, that trigger anxiety; in the midst of all the voices telling us what to think and how to respond, may we learn how to listen to the voice of our good shepherd, for he knows us, knows what we need, desires good for us, for he "came that [we] may have life, and have it abundantly."

And all God's people said...

Jesus the Good Shepherd

10 “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”