

May 25, 2025

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Deuteronomy 15:7-11, John 10:11-18 & John 21:15-16

Rooted & Engaged: Tend My Lambs

Our first New Testament scripture comes from Part 1 of the Gospel of John, sometimes known as the Book of Signs. It is where we hear about the public ministry of Jesus. Our story this morning takes place in Jerusalem. Jesus has just healed the man born blind – a story we heard during Lent – and the religious leaders are questioning just who Jesus is and by what authority he is acting. In response, Chapter 10 includes two discourses on Jesus identity, two of the seven “I am” statements that the Gospel of John is known for. In verse 7 we hear Jesus say that he is the “gate for the sheep...who ever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.” Jesus then extends this metaphor in our passage this morning, in a second “I am” statement, declaring that he is the good shepherd. He then explains what this means to the gathered religious leaders and his disciples. Hear now these words from John 10:11-18.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 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. 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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.”

Our second New Testament reading comes from Part 2 of the Gospel of John where we hear the passion story of Jesus’ last nights with his disciples, his death, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. Next week we will hear the full passage from the Gospel of John where Jesus appears to his disciples on the lakeshore after his resurrection, but this morning I want to share just a bit of that story from John 21:15-16:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

I have never tended sheep in my life. Herded cats... yes. But my experience with sheep and lambs is limited to a few petting zoo experiences and walking by the sheep barns on my way to get ice cream as a graduate student at the Univ. of Connecticut. So hence my questions in the Children's Time – Time for Wonder about what tending lambs might look like. I have the Google AI generated answers, which seems logical: To effectively tend lambs, focus on creating a safe and comfortable environment for them, ensuring they have access to nutritious food and clean water, and providing regular health checks. This includes recognizing signs of stress or illness and seeking veterinary advice when necessary. For sheep, it very similar, except to add that regular hoof care and shearing are also crucial.

Practical. Feasible. Not easy, I am sure, but eminently doable to become a competent – one may say even “good” shepherd once one learns the skills. And what does Jesus say about being a shepherd? The shepherd is the one who lays down one's life for the sheep. The hired hand runs away. But not the good shepherd. The good shepherd takes ownership of the flock. The good shepherd knows the flock and they know the good shepherd. And at the end of the passage we hear that the good shepherd brings other sheep into the fold. This is what a “good” shepherd does. This is who a “good shepherd” is.

In her commentary on this passage, Luther Seminary professor Sarah Henrich describes the nuance of the word *kalos* which is translated as “good” in this passage. We often think it means the “opposite of bad.” However Professor Henrich relates, “Jesus is the good shepherd insofar as he is a model shepherd as revealed in Israel's Scriptures. “Good;’ far from being an innocuous term of approval, has content that Jesus purports to embody. ... *Kalos* shepherding, therefore, will protect at any cost those followers who are intimately known to the shepherd. At the end of this passage, we hear that Jesus, the good (*kalos*) shepherd, knows the cost of protection and willingly pays it, in accord with God's (the Father's) goal of the ultimate protection of the sheep.”¹

I was intrigued by Professor Henrich's definition of the Greek word translated here as “good” and explored the word more in my biblical Greek dictionaries. The *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament*² gave five definitions for the word *kalos*, expressing the range of meanings we appreciate in English like having acceptable characteristics or functioning, providing some special or superior benefit, being fitting, being beautiful or attractive in terms of outward form or shape, having high or fine status and finally pertaining to a positive moral quality, with the implication of being favorably valued — ‘good, fine, praiseworthy.’ It is this latter connotation that Henrich is suggesting represents Jesus self-identification as a “good shepherd.” Not that he is a functional caretaker or attractive wielder of a crook, rather that he

¹ Sarah Henrich, Commentary on John 10:11-18. *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 2.* David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (eds.) Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p 451.

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, 2nd Edition*; Accordance Bible Software 13.3.2., Oaktree Software, October 2023 update.

is favorably valued, one to be praised and emulated for the importance he has to his flock, for what he is willing to do for his flock, for his identity as a shepherd. This “I am” statement, which takes us back to Moses meeting the Lord God in the burning bush and the Lord God revealing himself as “I am who I am.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. ... This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day.” (John 6:35, 40)

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” ... I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” Then they said to him, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” (John 8:12, 18-19)

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. ... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” (John 10: 11, 15, 17).

You hear the refrain of the relationship of Jesus to his Father in these “I am” identity statements, the most well-known being John 14: “I am the way and the truth and the life... If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Jesus was rooted in his identity as the son of the Lord God. Throughout the “I am” statements Jesus identifies his mission as that of drawing the people closer to God, his Father. And in doing this, he is willing to lay down his own life. And as we hear in verse 17, Jesus has the power to take that life back up again. In this statement, Jesus is foreshadowing his resurrection. And he is foreshadowing the appearance he makes after his resurrection on the lakeshore when he tells his disciples to tend his sheep and feed his lambs. Jesus is asking his disciples to take on his identity – to become his body here on Earth – and to be the good shepherd.

To be rooted in Christ and engaged in the world is to become a good shepherd. To work toward a world that Moses described in the words Kathi read from Deuteronomy:

“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. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ... Since there will never cease

to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, 'Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.'

Tending the lambs is the work we are called to; caring for a world torn apart by war and violence, greed and selfishness; by acts of cowardice for failing to stand up to language that breeds divisions and pits groups against each other. We are called to be good shepherds. To lay down our lives – lay down our a portion of our comfort, so that others may have some; to sacrifice being a little uncomfortable with friends and family as we stand up for the rights for our immigrant neighbors; to stand up for human rights.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we honor those who have laid down their life for our freedoms: our freedom to express ourselves, to assemble freely, to not be thrown in prison without due process, to not have unreasonable searches and seizures because of the color of our skin or the language we speak, to worship without government interference. As we honor those who gave the ultimate sacrifice, I think about the wounds of war and the deep price we pay to heal them. I think of the battlefields of Vicksburg and Gettysburg, of the beaches of Normandy and of Verdun, France. Brian and I visited Verdun on Bastille Day, July 14, 1998. It is one of the most haunting places I have ever been. The earth is still pock marked from artillery shells. The trenches that harbored the troops and from which artillery was fired at the opposing side are still there as a reminder of the futility of this war. As are bones from 130,000 unidentified remains brought in from the battlefield. They are stored in an ossuary flanked by 13,000 crosses.

The 20th century Catholic priest and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is best known for his theological insights on the nature of Christ – a cosmic Christ who transcends time and place. In addition to being a priest, Teilhard was also a paleontologist who worked on many digs, most notably in China. He played an important role in the interpretation of bones - really fragments of broken bones – that were discovered in the 1920's near Beijing China.

Teilhard spent much of his life dealing with the broken - and not just bones. As a young man he served as a medic and chaplain in World War I. He carried stretchers from the battlefields to the makeshift clinics nearby. He served in some of the most ferocious battles of the war. In 1916 he wrote to his cousin Marguerite about the battle at Verdun: "I don't know what sort of monument the country will later put up to commemorate the great battle. There's only one that would be appropriate: a great figure of Christ. Only the image of the crucified can sum up, express and relieve all the horror, and beauty, all the hope and deep mystery in such an avalanche of conflict and sorrows."³

Teilhard's words strike a chord with me. He thought that it is only Christ who can heal the deep wounds of that most brutal of wars. And it is Christ who can heal the deep wounds in

³ <https://teiharddechardin.org/teihard-de-chardin/biography-of-teihard-de-chardin/>. Originally published in *The Making of a Mind*, New York, 1965, pp. 119/20.

our most brutal of political landscapes. It is Christ, the Good Shepherd. It is Christ who lays down his life for us. It is Christ who tells us that if we love him more than the things of the world, we will tend his sheep and feed his lambs.

There are many ways for us to live out that call. I invite you to ponder the words of Howard Thurman's meditation *Canal or Reservoir*⁴ that you will find in the words of preparation in the bulletin. Sometimes we are called to be canals and to be connecting links to people, movements and purposes. Sometimes we are called to be reservoirs – deep holding spaces for the springs of water that never fail. Canals and reservoirs take in and give back. They tend the lambs. As we get ready to for our Intergenerational Mission Week in the second week of June, I want to challenge you find ways to engage in the ministry of tending the lambs of the world. There will be opportunities at different times of the day and with different types of activities, all of which will reflect our belief that through our love of Christ we can tend to the fractures and faults and wounds of our world.

Because Christ desires us to be in community, in communion with him and with each other. To be in communion with the Christ that takes the broken pieces of bone, the wounded flesh, the shattered hearts, the eyes that can't see and the ears that can't hear and the voices that have gone mute from too many years of crying. A Christ that takes all that brokenness and draws it together in love. A Christ that is the Good Shepherd. A Christ who tells us that if we love him, we will feed his lambs and tend his sheep. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁴ Howard Thurman. *Meditations of the Heart*, Beacon Press. 2022 ed. (originally published 1953); p 58-59.