

**North Shore Congregational Church**

Located in Fox Point, WI

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**What Does a Good Shepherd Look Like?**

Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 31

11For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. 12As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. 14I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.

15I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. 16I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

31You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God.

Introduction: Our New Testament reading is from John's gospel and is drawn for a section that is called the Good Shepherd discourse...listen for God's Word in

John chapter 10 verses 10b-18

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The 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. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I 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. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No 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."

Prayer: Gracious and Good Shepherd, may the readings we just heard speak truth to us, and may your presence infuse us as we continue. Amen

## **What Does a Good Shepherd Look Like?**

Most of us live in a relatively urban/suburban setting. The closest I have been to sheep has been in the petting zoo or finding one of Margaret's favorite stuffed animals from when she was little. It was loved so much that there isn't a single curly piece of fur left on it.

We do not have fields full of sheep in most of our neighborhoods, we don't go for long walks with a shepherd's hook looking for strays, but we do have images in our mind about sheep and shepherds. We have costumes that come out for the Christmas pageant and sheep shaped cutouts filled in with cotton balls that our children make. We have pictures of Jesus, smiling peacefully at us with a lamb wrapped around his shoulders.

And yet when Jesus is talking about himself here in our reading and says, "I am the good shepherd..." he is not reclining on a hillside or sitting in a grassy pasture with his disciples teaching a lesson to them.

No, in John's gospel these words are spoken to a combination of disciples and Pharisees following a confrontation about Jesus' authority. Tension abounds when a man who Jesus had healed of blindness verbally tussles with the religious leaders who claim he, the man Jesus healed, must be a sinner and they have driven him out of the community. It is this situation that Jesus is commenting on when he says not only that he is the good shepherd, but that he has other sheep that must be brought into the community (rather than driven out)... and that he will lay his life down willingly!

The shepherd and the flock is a common image in the Bible. Abraham kept sheep, Moses tended his father in laws flock, David, the one who wrote psalms and became the king tended sheep.

Our first reading this morning is one, amongst many, in which the image of shepherd is attributed to God, and we heard God say through the prophet Ezekiel that God will search for and draw in the scattered sheep. That God will feed them, provide for them, bring justice in a way that sustains them and be their God.

And in our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus acknowledges boldly the intimate relationship with God, acknowledges the authority and power that we receive as mercy and grace that are his. That as God is the Good Shepherd, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one-ness of God and Jesus is the same loving relationship that God in Jesus seeks with us, the one flock of one shepherd.

And we belong to him- seeking to know him and being known by him...and this is what makes us the flock, this is what makes us into a community, belonging and believing. And what is both beautiful and difficult is that being this community of faith doesn't mean that we each have the same gifts or goals. It doesn't mean we believe the same things in the same way, and yet somehow we are a church, somehow we worship together, we learn together and we make room for others together.

So, imagine the purpose and desire of this shepherd Jesus, the one who is willing to lay down his life, the one who knows there are other sheep that must be gathered in... And the exciting thing about this is that it says so clearly that Jesus isn't done yet...even though there is assurance and security in the beautiful image of the shepherd tending to the flock. And goodness knows in our rapid fire world it is good to rest and for our spirit to be fed. It is good to be grateful for the abundant life that we share. But Jesus isn't done...God is not

done with us yet. And if someday, somehow we will be of one flock, I wonder what that looks like, ...and am grateful that it is more than I can imagine!

But who might that be, these “other sheep” that Jesus speaks of? This week I found a beautiful poem on one of my favorite blog sites. It is written by a man named Kenn Stock and it says better than I possibly could, what I want to say. So please hear this poem, where do they belong...

Where do they belong:

the atheist uncle? the learned professor? the hairdresser who has given up on religion?

Where do they belong:

the altruistic benefactor? the faithful spouse who never went to worship? the friend who left the church years ago?

Where do they belong?

Might they be ‘the other sheep’? The ‘other sheep’ who listen to the voice of Jesus in their everyday routine encounters with grocery clerks, co-workers, neighbors, and clever cornball relatives.

Who hear the Shepherd’s call in the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

Jesus announces: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”

Could grace be more expansive than our ecclesiastical boundaries, the walls of the church, the flock inside?

And if these other sheep, according to our Gospel this morning, will listen to God’s voice, how are we listening now? We all know these “other sheep” - they are everywhere in our lives. They are our neighbors, our family, and our friends. Perhaps there is something we have to learn from them and something we need to say to them.

And so, what about some other images to think about when we imagine a shepherd and the flock? I imagine the shepherd might be scruffy, a bit unkempt. That shepherd and sheep out on the edges of civilization, perhaps in precarious places, the possibility of predators around. So, when we imagine what a good shepherd looks like what do we see? The one who cares deeply that some have left the flock or even worse left the faith...the one who will go out and search, seeking to embrace those who are living on the edges...the one who will lay down their life even for those who seem to know nothing about God’s goodness and grace.

And if this is what the Good Shepherd looks like, then we know that this shepherd can be found in all of these things that Jesus teaches about. All these things are the things we care about, the things we pray for, the things we worry about, the things we give to.

We worry about fluctuating or shrinking numbers in the pews and Sunday school rooms, we worry that there is simply not enough time or resources to give, we care about how best to support the school system and our children, we pray about crime and violence in our city, or the uncountable number of migrants, what they are fleeing from and where will they will go. And then there are natural disasters and the unnatural consequences of poverty.

And sometimes we forget that God is there in the midst of all these thing. We forget that Jesus the Good Shepherd, looked like a transient homeless man and we cannot imagine what that might look like today.

But what if we can see the Good Shepherd in the tired eyes of a mom or dad that just wants to sleep in on a Sunday morning? What if we can see the Good Shepherd in the face of the teacher in an overcrowded classroom that keeps showing up for the love of the children?

What if we were to imagine that those serving the welfare of the public good in service in our communities and to our country carry something of the Good Shepherd in them? What if we can imagine that on the face of the uncountable migrants is the face of hope? What if we can see the Good Shepherd in those preparing or already there in the ravages following the earthquake in Nepal?

There are all sorts of negative or less than appealing things we can attribute to sheep. As Rick might know from his late brother's flock, sheep are not supposed to be terribly smart...and they might be a bit smelly. But I don't believe this is at all what Jesus is talking about when he speaks of those who know him and know his voice, or about those others that are not yet part of the flock. The image we embrace as being sheep is that we grow in trust with the one who gives us life, we see that abundance is not found in possessions but in love offered up.

Let's pray that God will work in us and through us to offer and share the abundant life we experience as shepherds and sheep, as children of God. Amen and Amen.

### **Prayer of Invocation and The Lord's Prayer**

Gracious God,

You give of yourself for us so that we may have abundant life. You protects us and lead us and care for us like a Good Shepherd for their flock. Help us to know how we are called to follow you and yet also help us to shepherd one and other in your ways. Teach us to pray in the way that you taught your first disciples to pray saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

### Concerns of the Church and Morning Prayer

Yesterday this room was filled with those who came to celebrate Cory Block's life, please hold his family and friends in your prayers as they continue to experience his loss.

Pray often for Joe Hilyard, that he will be made well and this his family will remain with good hope and spirits.

We pray for Ed Heinecke and family as they too continue to experience the loss of Priscilla.

There is great hope and relief that Kathleen Hannan and the team she has been working with in Nepal have all been located as safe we do raise up continued prayers not only for their safety but for the many who have been lost and the ongoing process of search, rescue and restoration. May God's strength and healing be strongly realized?

And there is much to be grateful for with the presentation and then unanimous vote for Rev Dr Marty Hall to become your Sr. Minister. So much to look forward to and be part of, but again we should acknowledge the tremendous tireless work, growth and prayer of the search and call committee.

Today we will hear the names of those who are offering to serve on one of the Boards of the church--we are grateful and offer prayers of support.

Gracious God, it is You we turn to because you made us to be Yours and as we rest in your care we remember our joys, our fears, our hopes and our sorrows.

Speak to us again with compassion for we wish to hear Your voice, and gather in the people You call Your flock and expand our wisdom and hearts to be your hands in this world. Stir within us the knowledge that you are the Good Shepherd as we pray for

Those who are grieving the loss of a loved one,

Those who are grieving other things lost, be it a relationship, a job, a sense of purpose, a sense of security. When the world is shaken help us remember to be still and know that You are God.

For those who struggle with pain, ill health, whose body, mind and spirit are worn...infuse your Presence into them and bring hope.

Clear the way Good Shepherd, let us hear your voice calling us to hope and comfort, action and kindness. Remind us to of the abundant life that we share and the joy and purpose you give us.

In Jesus' name we pray,  
Amen

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