

April 21, 2024 (Easter 4 B)

John 10:11-18

“The Shepherd we NEED”

Human beings can be unbelievably stubborn and even downright stupid most of the time. It’s totally accurate when Jesus calls us **“sheep”** – but very few, it seems, actually know that or believe it. Humanity is so quick to believe the ridiculous LIE that there is no “god” out there and all this just happened on its own by random chance. They embrace that lie because then they get to be their own gods and do whatever they want – and make up the rules as they go. I’ve heard people arrogantly claim that Christianity is just a pathetic “crutch” for weak and gullible people. *“I don’t need some make-believe shepherd”* they say, *“I’m strong and I’m in control of my own destiny.”* We can understand why, in His mercy, God often allows a great CRASH – to bring stubborn sheep to their knees and help them see that they really do need a shepherd.

Many people have come to that realization – it’s just that those sheep so often pick ***the wrong shepherd***. That financial planner says he can help you be secure and well taken care of throughout life and retirement. That medical professional claims she can help you be healthy and strong through proper diet and exercise. That life coach claims he can help you have the winning attitude and succeed in achieving all your goals. That counsellor says she can help you overcome all your problems. Others think that special someone to love will make their lives complete and their days filled with joy and happiness. Let’s face it: sheep are foolish and ignorant.

But – some of us sheep actually DO know the **Good Shepherd**. We know that He lay down His perfect life to earn forgiveness and salvation *FOR* us, and has given it to us by the gift of faith . . . *and yet . . . how many of us are actually clinging to the “hired hands” instead of HIM?* Jesus warns us about that in **verses 11-13 of John 10** (NIV).

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.”

Who is the “hired hand” here? Most commentators and theologians I read on this say the “hired hand” refers to BAD leaders – hypocrites, false teachers, wicked ministers who serve only themselves and not God – people like the Pharisees whom Jesus so harshly rebuked. But . . . as I studied this text carefully, I began to question that interpretation more and more. Jesus said the Pharisees (and bad religious leaders like them) actually worked directly for Satan – he was (and is) their boss and spiritual father. Rotten leaders in the church don’t run away from the wolf – *they work for him* – and they lead sheep right into his ferocious fangs. This “hired hand” however, works for **God** . . . but is *NOT the Good Shepherd*, and does not himself own the sheep.

Verse 13 is generally translated in a way that (I think) often leads people to somewhat misunderstand what Jesus is saying. The NIV says, ***“The hired hand . . . cares nothing [the word “nothing” is supplied, it’s not actually there in the Greek] for the sheep.”*** The text literally says, ***“The hired hand runs away – because, that’s what he is: a hired hand! And – his concern [I would say his chief concern] is not for the sheep.”*** He’s a hired hand – he’s simply not capable of loving the sheep as the Good Shepherd does – he could never fill that role. He might love the sheep a great deal . . . but he’s not the Good Shepherd, and we dare not expect him to **be** the Good Shepherd.

That interpretation certainly *broadens things out* for us here. God provides all sorts of ***“hired hands”*** that He calls upon, to be His arms and legs, who serve Him . . . as they help and shepherd us. For example: FAMILY. Parents do God’s work as they nurture, care for, lead, guide, instruct and protect their children. Spouses do God’s work as they care for us and faithfully meet our needs. At some point children serve God as they care for their parents – and relatives can provide wonderful care and service too. CHURCH FAMILY serves God as they shepherd us too. It’s a gift of God to have faithful pastors, elders, Sunday school teachers, spiritual mentors, and brothers and sisters in the Faith to support and encourage us. THE SOCIETY we live in can even be used by God to serve us well. The military and the police provide us with peace, stability, freedom and security. First responders can be His blessings / servants for us in times of need. The health care system has doctors, nurses, new technology and prescriptions there to help us.

God provides us with all sorts of “hired hands” to help and bless us in so many ways. *But – what’s the **problem**?* The PROBLEM

is, that we foolish sheep, can lean on and trust the hired hands *more* than we lean on and trust the Good Shepherd. One lady told me she quit going to church entirely – because when she went through this horrible time, she reached out to her pastor for help – and he had the audacity to be on vacation with his family! He wasn't there for her. I've heard people who feel totally betrayed because their pastor took a call and left the flock. He abandoned them – his flock, because he was looking out for himself, and he wanted to be near family in the “holy land” of Wisconsin where his kids could have Lutheran schools. Regardless if whether there's any truth in that or not – it's how those sheep felt. A dear woman lost her husband and she told me that HE was her ROCK – she couldn't go on with out him and her life was now over. She had no one. She was totally and completely alone.

We can so easily cling to the hired hands, and expect *people* to be what only **Christ** can be. Scripture opens our eyes to this harsh reality: we are NOTHING but weak and pathetic foolish sheep – steeped in sin and bound for death and hell / totally weak and totally vulnerable / without a shred of hope . . . unless . . . that is . . . we are found and rescued by the **Good Shepherd**.

He is THE Shepherd – the *ONLY SHEPHERD* – we all truly **NEED**. We need a Redeemer Shepherd – One who loves us more than any human being ever could / One is strong enough and willing to bear death and hell itself in order to save us / One who has the power and the authority to lay down His life for the sheep – and then, to take it up again and shepherd us through life to heaven. THIS is the Shepherd we truly **NEED**: (John 10:14-18) **14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep 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 are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”**

He is the only Shepherd who can provide you forgiveness for your sins. He is the only One who can get you through anything – even death itself. He is the only One who never goes off duty and is never unavailable. He is the only One who will never leave you and never fail you. He is the only One who can and does give you His 100%

undivided attention, anytime you reach out to Him in prayer. And, He has promised to always and only act in your best interest – because He loves you so much that He willingly died for you.

*So . . . if we have HIM – the only Good Shepherd we truly NEED . . . then do we even really need church / a pastor / our family / a spouse – or, for that matter, anyone else at all? Well – no, strictly speaking, not really. The hired hands our Good Shepherd provides are blessings for us, and can serve us faithfully in so many ways . . . but they are NOT, in essence, essential – because the Good Shepherd is the *only Shepherd we truly need* and the only Shepherd that can never be taken from us and that will never fail us.*

The hired hands who HELP – will help us learn ever more to cling to HIM. As Paul said in **Acts 20:28** *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”* And – it's not just pastors who can serve as Jesus' hired hands. **Hebrews 6:10** says, *“God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.”* We give thanks to God for all His servants who help us in so many ways – *but* – we TRUST in the Good Shepherd because He, at the end of the day, is the only Shepherd we **need**.

And HERE is your Good Shepherd's challenge that He has set before YOU: *Get out there – and be the **best hired hands** that you can possibly be!* We do that by serving and helping *them* in whatever ways we can – while ultimately working and doing it all for HIM. Just keep in mind that **He** is the Good Shepherd – not you. You are not 100% reliable, and you will fail from time to time, and you are often unavailable and unreliable, and you are mortal and can be taken out by almost anything.

Therefore the *good hired hands* work tirelessly to help people cling to Christ, not to us. He is really the only Shepherd we truly **NEED** – stay close to Him. Without Him we are nothing, and we have nothing, and we can expect nothing but death and darkness for all eternity. BUT – in Him we have everything – now and forever, and we are so blessed that we get to be His hired hands and help other people to meet their Good Shepherd and stay close to Him – the only One who can and will lead us through the valley of the shadow of death to dwell in the house of the LORD forever. Sheep that understand THAT are a truly rare breed indeed – they are both smart and useful sheep!