

THE SACRIFICIAL SHEPHERD

John 10:11-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 25, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 10, verses 11 through 18. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and he exercises the authority of a shepherd in the most unexpected way. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 10, beginning at verse 11, we read in Jesus' name.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing 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 And I have other sheep that are not of 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 that I may 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 I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Dear beloved sheep of God,

You are under the gracious and sacrificial authority of Jesus, your Good Shepherd.

I don't know if that sounds good or bad to you; maybe it's a little of both. I called you sheep. Actually, Jesus calls you sheep. I'm just calling you what Jesus calls you. We are sheep. And that's kind of offensive. That term is usually used as an insult. When people are subject to their authorities without questioning the things other people think they should question, they're called "sheep" or sometimes "sheeple." It's an insult implying that we can't really think for ourselves. We like the illusion that we are freethinkers. To be a follower or a sheep implies that we are weak. And this is offensive. It's the offense of the A-word. That's right, *authority*. Authority has become an especially troublesome thing in today's world. The biblical concept of authority is under attack. So the love and grace of our Good Shepherd sound good. But the words "sheep" and "authority" probably offend us.

Dear beloved sheep of God,

You are under the gracious and sacrificial authority of Jesus, your Good Shepherd.

Authority is a good thing. This is an especially important concept for Christians to understand and accept. Authority is a good thing. This is also one of the most important concepts for us to be able to articulate to the world around us. Authority is a good thing.

THE SACRIFICIAL SHEPHERD (John 10:11-18)

Our world is obsessed with authority right now. Or it might be more accurate to say that our world is obsessed with *power*. And power is more base than authority. Authority is the ability *and* the right to do something. Power is merely the ability to do something, regardless of whether or not you have the right to do that thing, and regardless of whether or not that action is just. Our world is consumed in power struggles. Perhaps you've noticed. Who has the power? What should they do with their power? How do I get power for myself or my group of people? What will we do when we take power for ourselves? We are divided into different classes on the basis of race, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, and more. And today each of these classes is labeled as either being oppressive or oppressed.

The basic idea is that there are many different classes of people, and every class can be identified as either an oppressive class or an oppressed class. Whatever class appears to have more power, usually the majority class, is assumed to be an oppressor, and whatever class, or classes, have less power, usually the minority classes, is assumed to be oppressed. So social justice means that the oppressed classes must struggle against the oppressive classes until power is balanced. Then, if balance is ever achieved, we will have a better world, one in which all people are equal.

So our world is obsessed with power right now, classes of people banding together and fighting against the powers that be. Then we see people in the classes that have been identified as oppressive fighting back, because they find themselves in a struggle they didn't even know existed. In this way, our world is obsessed with power. And it has not made the world a better place.

The primary failure of this idea is that it does not recognize the existence of God. In fact, it often views God as a tool invented by those who hold power in order to exert control over the oppressed. Therefore, it does not recognize God as the source of all authority, and it certainly does not recognize his authority as good.

But this is nothing new. For a long time now, human beings have been conditioned to view authority as oppressive. Authority is a bad word to us. Every human being hates authority. Now I suspect some of you might not agree with me, at least not yet. You might doubt what I'm saying, because we can all probably think of authority figures we like. It's kind of funny: we crave authority because God designed us to live under it. So we find authority figures we like, and we rally behind them. But if that authority figure suddenly does something we don't like, or if he gets replaced by someone else, then we tantrum against authority. This reveals that we, in all actuality, do not like authority. We measure our authorities against our own desires and values. And if we are free to pick and choose which authorities we like and which ones we don't, then our authorities are not really the authorities. We are. And so the world is a constant struggle of individuals and classes fighting for power.

I sometimes wonder how the world came to be this way. How did it get so hostile? For you students of history out there, I think we can identify one event in world history that was a real turning point in this regard. There was a time when human beings respected authority and willingly lived under it. But there was one event that really warped the minds of everyone since then. A serpent once said to a woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). The serpent implied that God was selfish to hog all the knowledge of good and evil for himself. The serpent painted God as oppressive and gave the woman the opportunity to become like God. Or, at least, that's what he claimed would happen. He tempted her to reject God's authority in favor of her own. And she did, as did her husband with her. And since that point, the minds of

every human being have been warped. We have continued to measure every authority against our own desires. We have been conditioned by the fall into sin to despise authority. We view it as oppressive.

In the face of this, Scripture teaches something different. Scripture teaches a positive view of authority, one in which those in authority do not use their power to serve themselves or even their own class, but to serve all those under their authority. For this reason, God has instituted every earthly authority. In each of the three estates—the Church, the home, and civil society—God has instituted earthly authorities to serve those under authority. These earthly authorities may not even recognize God has given them this authority. It's always better if they do recognize this, but even if they don't, God uses them for his purposes.

So when we teach our children about these authorities, we should teach them the ideal God intends. No human being ever lives up to the ideal, at least not perfectly, but we should start with God's will for every authority. We should teach them that their pastors and Sunday school teachers exist to feed them with the Word of God. We should teach them that their parents exist to protect them from danger; feed them with food; discipline, train, and teach them, both in the Word of God and in the natural wisdom of God's creation. We should teach our children that their teachers at school are an extension of their parents' authority. We should teach our children that government is instituted by God to protect them by enacting just legislation and ensuring a well-ordered society. We should teach our children that police officers exist to protect them and their neighbors by enforcing the laws of the land. In these and many other vocations of authority, God has placed servants, and he has done this for our good. We should teach our children what positive services God has ordained our authorities to provide. Then they will not expect to receive other services from their authorities, services they might desire, but which God has not ordained. And when we teach our children the positive view of authority, they also will be able to recognize when their authorities fail in their vocations or abuse their authority. All of these vocations are filled with sinners. None of them perform their services perfectly. But when we teach them the positive view, they will be able to identify those authorities who abuse their power and call them out on it. Every authority is still under God's authority. And sometimes they need to be reminded of this.

The basic principle to remember is that every authority exists to serve those under authority. No authority exists to serve the person in authority. Every authority has been instituted by God to serve those under authority. Authority is a good thing.

This positive kind of authority is radically demonstrated in Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse.

Before we examine how Jesus uses his authority, I first want to observe the simple fact that Jesus identifies himself as the supreme authority. This is naturally seen in the relationship between shepherd and sheep. The shepherd is obviously the authority figure. He possesses superior intellect and skill. He also owns the sheep. So he has the ability and the right to do whatever he wants with them. So when Jesus identifies himself as the shepherd, and us as the sheep, he asserts his supreme authority over us.

He also asserts his supreme authority over all things in the way he says, **"I am the Good Shepherd"** (10:11). A little bit is lost in translation here. Jesus says, **"I am,"** in a distinct way (Ἐγώ εἰμι) that recalls the Old Testament name Yahweh. "Yahweh" was the Hebrew name God used to reveal himself in the Old Testament. The name means, "I AM," but our English bibles usually just translate it as, "The LORD." Jesus recalls this Old Testament name when he says, **"I**

am the Good Shepherd.” And this point is driven home when we remember Psalm 23, which we read for the introit this morning. There King David says, “The LORD is my shepherd.” Our shepherd is none other than the LORD, Yahweh. So Jesus makes a really bold claim when he calls himself the Good Shepherd. He claims to be God, the same God who created the heavens and the earth, the same God who spoke to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt, drove the inhabitants out of Canaan, scattered armies, placed David on the throne of Israel, and rescued Daniel from the lions’ den. Jesus claims to be the one true God. We read this as Christians, almost 2,000 years after Jesus spoke these words, so it’s not really shocking to us. But imagine being there at the time. Here’s this man, an ordinary looking man, standing right in front of you, claiming to be the one true God. He claims to be the supreme authority of the universe.

We’ll come back to this bold claim and what Jesus does to prove it to be true, but let’s look now at how the Good Shepherd uses his authority. Consider the natural relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. What’s the point of owning and raising sheep? And we’re thinking purely in agricultural terms here. Suppose you decide to raise sheep. Why would you raise sheep? Part of it might be that you like animals, and you want to do something you enjoy. But you don’t enjoy it to the extent that the sheep become your friends. You probably don’t bake them cakes on their birthdays, you don’t take them to the Grand Canyon, and you don’t give them all names. Or maybe you do. If you ever buy livestock, consider giving them names like Tender, Juicy, and Savory. That way, sometime later when you’re having dinner, you can say, “Ooh, that’s Savory.” And when you sell the rest to the butcher, you can say, “This one is Tender.” That’s why you raise sheep. Sometimes people raise sheep exclusively for their wool. But usually the big payoff is when you butcher them or sell them to a butcher. People raise sheep to kill them so that they can have a house to live in, and bake cakes for human birthdays, and take their kids to the Grand Canyon. The whole point of raising sheep is that, one day, the sheep will lay down their lives for the shepherd. And they do not do this of their own will. Someone always takes their life from them. This, according to our minds, is what a good shepherd does. It’s how he uses his authority. And this is even in harmony with the will of God. Never does the shepherd lay down his own life for the sheep. That’s backward. And never does the shepherd send his son to lay down his life for the sheep. That would be a crime, and an especially bad one. Such a person would not be a good shepherd by our standards, but an insane shepherd. A good shepherd, by worldly standards, uses his authority to slaughter the sheep.

But what does our Good Shepherd do with his sheep? How does Jesus use his authority? He uses his authority to serve us in the most radical way. “**The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep**” (10:11). Human words and human thoughts cannot express how radical this is. “**The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.**” And he is not insane for doing so. In most cases, it would be insane to lay down one’s life for the sheep. Not only is it a miscalculation of the sheep’s worth, but once the shepherd is dead and out of the way, then the wolf can have his way with the sheep. It wouldn’t even accomplish what the shepherd intends.

But Jesus has a unique authority. So far in the Good Shepherd discourse, Jesus has been talking about his authority over the sheep and how he uses that authority to serve them. But he has not yet actually used the word “authority.” He finally uses the A-word at the end when he claims to have authority over his own life. This is an authority no other human possesses. But Jesus does. He says, “**For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again**” (10:17-18). He does not leave the sheep

THE SACRIFICIAL SHEPHERD (John 10:11-18)

defenseless when he lays down his life. He lays down his life as a sacrifice in place of the sheep, and he takes his life up again so that he might live forever as our Good Shepherd.

This is how Jesus proves that he has all authority. Remember, we talked about how Jesus claimed to be the one true God and possess authority over all things. That's a bold claim. And this is the proof of it. If he talks big like this, dies, and then stays dead, he's insane. But if he prophesies of his own death and resurrection, submits himself to crucifixion, and then rises from the dead on the third day, then he actually knows what he's talking about, and he is the one true God, and he is our Good Shepherd. His resurrection proves his bold claims. Jesus uses his authority over his own life to prove that he is our Good Shepherd.

And remember, Jesus does not use his authority to serve himself. He always uses his authority to serve his sheep. So not only does he exercise his authority over his own life. He has authority over the lives of his sheep. If he can take up his own life, he can also take up yours. And this is what he promises to do. His resurrection is not his own. He promises it to you as well. He is your Good Shepherd. He leads you every moment of your lives, and even through death.

I think my favorite word in Psalm 23 is the word "through." "Even though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). Jesus does not lead us *into* the shadow of death. He leads us *through* it. Jesus' beloved sheep do not remain in death. Jesus did not remain in death, and he will not permit his beloved sheep to remain in death. He leads them through it on the way to the glorious resurrection. Just as he was raised to perfect and incorruptible life, he will raise his sheep to that same perfect and incorruptible life. On the Last Day, when he returns in glory, that familiar voice will call his sheep out of the valley of death. We will arise and follow. "And [we] shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Ps. 23:6).

Dear beloved sheep of God,

You are under the gracious and sacrificial and life-giving authority of Jesus, your Good Shepherd, now and for all eternity. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.