

**+ John 10:11-18 + The Good Shepherd Knows His Sheep + 4th Sunday of Easter + 29 April 2012 +**

Who really knows you? By that I mean someone who knows your past, someone who knows how you think. They know what fills you with joy or brings out a tear. They know what fills you with anger or with fear. They know what makes you tick.

For many of us, the people who really know you or me may be a very small group. Oh, people know who you are, but in most cases, they may only know one side of you. You see, it's pretty typical for people like you and me to convey what each of us wants others to see. If you're at home, you may project yourself in a way that may differ from what you're like at work or at school or at church or online. Your co-workers, your classmates, your neighbors, and your fellow churchgoers don't know you as well as your spouse or a parent or a close friend knows you. You could even say no one knows you better than you...or is there someone who does?

This morning we join Jesus in Jerusalem six months before his death and resurrection, and we find out how well he knows you and me 2000 years later. On the one hand, knowing he knows you better than yourself can be disconcerting, even terrifying. On the other, knowing how well he knows you and your life can be a great source of comfort. Either way, Jesus makes it absolutely clear **THE GOOD SHEPHERD KNOWS HIS SHEEP.**

***"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep..."*** The Good Shepherd knows what his sheep are really like, and it's not a pretty picture. I don't know how much you know about sheep, but to put it bluntly, they're pretty dumb. In fact, the Greek word for "sheep" literally means, "forward-moving thing". That's pretty appropriate when you consider what a sheep does—eat, bleat, and move forward. Sheep are pretty helpless. They don't know how to evade a predator. They don't have fangs or claws or ferocity to defend themselves. In fact, sheep often need protection from themselves! Sheep have been known to crush each other if they huddle too closely inside their pen. If a sheep stumbles and rolls on its back, it can't turn itself over. It just lays there bleating away with legs flailing. Sheep easily wander from the flock and get hopelessly lost even when they're within sight of the flock. Sheep are really nothing, but helpless, forward-moving things.

At first glance, it's not really a compliment to be called a sheep. If someone calls you a sheep, they're probably saying you follow blindly, that you're incapable of thinking for yourself, and that you're completely helpless at the mercy of another. So how does that make you feel when Jesus refers to you and me as his own ***"sheep"***?

To tell you the truth, as unflattering as it sounds, you and I are best described as sheep. Perhaps you can already see the similarities spiritually speaking. On our own, we're unable to defend ourselves against the attacks of Satan, who like a wolf ***"snatches and scatters"*** us. We can't stand up against the pressures of the world around us. We're easy targets.

At the same time, we actually harm ourselves as much as our enemies do. We crush each other with unkind words and actions. Though we know better, we still keep falling into the same frustrating sins of weakness. Like an upside-down sheep, we're dead in sin. Even when we're on our feet, we love to wander and get hopelessly lost, as Isaiah (53:6) described, ***"We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way..."*** Oh, and Jesus, our Shepherd, knows how much you and I are like sheep.

You could even say that in our sin, we're often more like the useless hired hand Jesus mentions. ***"The hired man, since he is not the shepherd and doesn't own the sheep, leaves them and runs away when he sees a wolf coming. The wolf then snatches and scatters them. This happens because he is a hired man and doesn't care about the sheep."*** It's another unpleasant way that Jesus knows us, isn't it?

We often fail to show love for others and for the Word of truth. In cowardice we save our own skins when helping someone or standing up for the truth might put us in harm's way. "I don't want to stand up for the truth of God's Word. I might get picked on!" "I don't want to point out to a co-worker that Jesus is the only to heaven and that his religion is leading him to hell. Things might get awkward—then think how hard my job would be!" "I'm not so sure about inviting my neighbor to church. I don't want to stick my nose in her business...I'll just leave her to the wolves." For countless sins of abandoning others in need, you and I deserve to be abandoned to the wolves and torn apart.

The Good Shepherd knows what you and I are really like—both foolish sheep and worthless hired hands. This isn't just a passing knowledge. He's known you since the moment your life began at conception. He knows your foolish mistakes and how you tried to make up for them or covered them up. He knows what's in your heart of hearts and how your sinful nature daily endangers your soul. What he knows should drive him far away from every one of us, but that's not what the Good Shepherd does.

Your Good Shepherd cares for you. He loves you with an unexplainable, undying love! Why? Would a human shepherd willingly die for worthless sheep? Most wouldn't. "It's just a job! Who cares if you lose one or two? It's not worth risking your life!" ...But that's not Jesus! He said, **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."** Jesus loved all people, even you, but why? You give him no reason whatsoever that he should love you, yet he still loves you. He still saves you by giving up his own life. Jesus' undeserved, self-sacrificing love made him willing to lay down his own life and suffer the wolves' attack in your place.

How marvelous is the love Jesus has for helpless, unlovable sheep like us! He knows what you and I are really like, but even more remarkably he still loves us and cares for every one of us. Now knowing that Jesus knows you better than you know yourself can be a source of joy and comfort.

**"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me..."** What kind of knowledge is this? It's not the kind of knowledge you get from history books or television or the internet. If I asked, "Do you know Jim Boeheim or Donald Trump?", you might respond, "Yeah, I know who they are, but I don't know them." Like a parent who knows his child or a husband who knows his wife personally and intimately, Jesus knows you personally and intimately. He knows your past, present, and future. He knows what makes you tick, but he also knows what brings you joy or sadness or anger or fear. He knows why you feel that way because he knows you right down to the core of your soul. He knows you **"as the Father knows me, and I know the Father."** Consider how well Jesus knows his heavenly Father. That's how well the Good Shepherd knows you and that's comforting!

In fact, Jesus knows you better than you know yourself. Is there a hurt or a need or a fear you're too embarrassed to admit? Jesus knows it. He knows your needs, your desires, your pains and fears. That means he also knows all your sins—every selfish thought, every hurtful word, every loveless action, but Jesus also knows you need a solution to your sin and the hell you deserve, even if you don't. For that reason the Good Shepherd laid down his life for you. Jesus took all your sins on himself and willingly gave up his holy and innocent life in exchange for the guilt of your sins, but there's more! Jesus explains, **"I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have the right to lay it down, and I have the right to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."**

Isn't that remarkable? Not only did the Good Shepherd die for his sheep, but he also lives for his sheep! Even six months before his death, Jesus knew he would take his life back up again on Easter Sunday. By taking care of your greatest need, Jesus proved he could provide for your daily needs in a way that is best for you—sometimes with plenty, sometimes with less, sometimes in ways you never imagined. By taking up his life again, Jesus brings healing to your pain, comfort to your fear, and the assurance that he knows what's going on in your life and he won't ever abandon you like some hired hand. Take comfort, then, because **the Good Shepherd knows his sheep.**

This Good Shepherd also knows that there are other sheep out there who aren't in his fold yet. Jesus tells us, **"But I have other sheep that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."** As Jesus spoke those words 2000 years ago, he was thinking of you and me—sheep who had not become part of his fold yet. There are countless other wandering sheep out there in our world. So how will Jesus bring them into his fold? How will they hear his voice and get to know the Good Shepherd?

You and I get to serve as that voice. What greater comfort can you share with a friend or loved one who is hurting than by bringing them to know their Good Shepherd. No person is too foolish or too sinful or too "far gone" to not hear the voice of the Good Shepherd calling them to his flock. It's simply our task to be his mouthpiece calling out to people we know.

There may be very few people who really, truly know you, but you have a Good Shepherd who knows you better than you know yourself. He's known you by name since he called you into his flock through his Word and the waters of Holy Baptism. He knows how you've strayed, yet he still keeps calling you back into his fold. He knows your foolishness, yet loves you with an indescribable love. Yes, he knows what you're really like and who you really are, but in his love, Jesus knows you as his own sheep. Rejoice, dear Friends, in the Good Shepherd who knows you and loves you! Amen.