

+ John 10:11-18 + Big Words of Easter: Faithfulness + 4th Sunday of Easter + 17 April 2016 +

CIR HIRI!¹ Dear Fellow Sheep in the Good Shepherd's Flock,

There was a man who owned a large flock of sheep. The man had worked hard to build up that flock. He spent countless hours providing what they needed. He built a pen so they could sleep safely at night. He regularly took them out to lush pastures and clear waters. He bound up their injuries and protected them from danger. Yet those sheep were more than a hard-earned investment for that shepherd.

The shepherd loved his sheep. Now I know that sounds rather strange, but you can see it in how he cared for his sheep. That shepherd knew every stubborn ram, every motherly ewe, and every playful lamb—and they knew him. They knew his voice. They trusted his voice, and where he went, they followed. He knew when they would listen and when they needed a knock on the noggin. He knew when they were afraid. He knew what injuries they had sustained, and he spared no effort to find them when they were lost.

At night while they slept, the shepherd positioned himself in front of the opening to the sheep pen so nothing and no one could get in there. He was willing to put himself in harm's way for those sheep protecting them from wolves and other predators, enduring the hot sun, the pouring rain, and the driving snow. That man loved his sheep because he poured his blood, sweat, and tears into the care of each and every one.

It's not like they deserved it. Sheep are naturally pretty dumb. In fact, in Jesus' day, a sheep was nothing more than a "forward-moving thing." Pretty appropriate when you consider that a sheep only knows how to eat, bleat, and move forward. Being so dumb, sheep are pretty helpless. They don't know how to evade a predator. They can't protect themselves.

In fact, sheep often need more 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. Sheep easily wander from the flock in search of grass. They get hopelessly lost even within sight of the flock. Sheep are helpless, forward-moving things. So it's pretty amazing how much that shepherd cared for his sheep.

One time the man had to go away for a while. So the shepherd hired and trained a man to carry out all the necessary tasks—feed and water and watch over them. He showed the hired hand the best places for food and water and how to protect the sheep. "Don't let anything in the pen and don't let any of them out unless you're taking them somewhere. They're helpless and they don't know any better. Take care of them while I'm away."

The shepherd went away and things were alright. It wasn't the same for the sheep. After all, "***the hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep.***" They didn't know his voice and didn't always come when he called. They didn't trust him like the shepherd, even if he did provide for their basic needs. To him, those sheep were just a paycheck. He didn't know them personally, so his care was never the same, but things went alright—until a wolf showed up. There had been warning signs. Wolves could be heard at night. They were in the area. The hired hand knew he was supposed to protect those sheep, but then one evening, he saw the wolf.

With a ravenous look in its eyes, the wolf had seen an opportunity for an all-you-can-eat sheep buffet. With its sharp fangs bared and hunger in its belly, the lone wolf rushed at the flock. The sight of that big, hungry wolf terrified the hired hand. How was he going to fend off that predator? What if he couldn't stop the wolf? He didn't care about those sheep. He was just a hired hand. It wasn't worth putting himself in harm's way for those dumb animals! So the hired hand abandoned the flock—and devastation followed.

When the shepherd came back only a few sheep had survived. Those that weren't attacked were scattered, so it took a long time to gather the survivors. He bound up the injured and raised his flock with the same care as before. As long as he had life in his body, that shepherd faithfully cared for his flock and protected them from every danger that came their way.

In the end, what was the main difference between that shepherd and his hired hand? Both took care of the flock. Both fed and watered and guided the sheep. Both took care of injuries and administered discipline, but what was the key difference? Faithfulness. The faithfulness of the hired hand only went as far as money

¹ "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" This is known as the *Paschal Greeting*, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, "*Christ is risen!*", they automatically respond loudly and boldly, "*He is risen indeed!*"

motivated him. He didn't own the sheep and didn't care enough to put himself in harm's way to protect them. The faithfulness of the shepherd, however, went above and beyond. He was willing to put himself in harm's way for his sheep! His faithfulness for that flock went far deeper and lasted far longer than that of the hired hand.

...But why all this talk about sheep and shepherds? Most of us don't live in a rural setting. None of us are shepherds. Most of us have probably seen sheep in real life and probably have even pet a sheep or two, but few of us have ever owned one. Unlike the Jews of Jesus' day, who lived in a rural society where shepherd and sheep were familiar, that image isn't quite so familiar to us. Yet in that picture of a faithful shepherd and his sheep, we see the faithfulness of our Good Shepherd.

We find Jesus in the fall of his final year of ministry with about six months left before the cross. It was a time of opposition against Jesus. Like wolves on the hunt, Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, were trying to catch him in a trap, trying to get him to say or do something that would discredit him with the people and give them the upper hand. He had healed a man born blind on the Sabbath day—the Jewish day of rest when no one was supposed to work. So the Pharisees tried to use the technicality of Jesus' working on the Sabbath to discredit him, but the healed man publicly testified that Jesus was **“from God.”** This got the healed man tossed out of his synagogue, but Jesus healed his soul by revealing that he wasn't just **“from God.”** He actually was God. The Good Shepherd faithfully cared for that man's soul.

Faithfulness even to the most common, ordinary soul—that's what makes Jesus different from those who opposed him. That's what makes Jesus different from any other modern leader—spiritual, political, or cultural. The Good Shepherd is different from everyone else because he is so faithful.

You can see the Good Shepherd's faithfulness in how intimately he knows his sheep. Jesus explains, **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...”** How well does the Good Shepherd know you? The Good Shepherd knows you like a mother knows her child or a husband his wife—a personal, intimate knowledge from experience. Jesus knows you personally. In fact, he says that knowledge is **“...just 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!

Jesus knows you even better than you know you. He knows how much you and I are like sheep—unable to defend ourselves against the attacks of that wolf Satan, unable to stand up against the pressures of the world around us. We're easy targets. Yet we do ourselves almost more harm. We crush each other with unkind words and actions. We keep on falling into the same frustrating sins of weakness. We love to wander and get hopelessly lost

Nevertheless, the Good Shepherd faithfully cares for you and me. Is there a hurt or need you're too embarrassed to admit? Jesus knows it. He knows your needs, your desires, your pains. Jesus knows you need a solution to your sin and the hell you deserve, even if you don't. So the Good Shepherd faithfully brings you the healing salve of his hard-earned forgiveness and mercy and love. He refreshes your soul and gives you life eternal.

You can also see the Good Shepherd's faithfulness in how diligently he calls sheep to his flock. Jesus explains, **“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.”** Do you realize that Jesus is talking about you when he says that? You and I were sheep who were not part of his flock, yet Jesus sought us out. He searched high and low to bring us into his **“one flock.”** He didn't give up that search even though it required that he guide all of human history to bring his good news into your life at the right time so his Spirit could create faith in your heart.

There are countless other sheep wandering out there in our world. So how will Jesus bring them into his flock? How will they hear his voice? Well, he uses you and me. You and I serve as his voice sharing his comfort with a friend or loved one who is hurting. No person is too foolish or too sinful or too “far gone” to not hear the Good Shepherd faithfully call them to his flock.

In spite of all that, we have yet to see the ultimate example of the Good Shepherd's faithfulness! Stop and look at Jesus' words one more time. There's a statement in there that he mentions four times in these verses so we pay attention. **“I lay down my life for the sheep.”** You can see the Good Shepherd's faithfulness in how willingly he lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus explains, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to**

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 authority to take it up again.”

That willing faithfulness to lay down his life for the sheep made all the difference between the shepherd and the hired hand. The same is even truer about Jesus. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep. He sacrificed his life to protect you from guilt and Satan and death, but unlike a human shepherd, he didn't stay dead. That's what makes "faithfulness" such a "BIG" Easter word. Even six months before his death, Jesus knew he would take his life back up again on Easter morning. Jesus knew he would destroy death. Jesus knew he was not going to be defeated, but instead he would defeat your enemies. Jesus faithfully kept his promise and came back from the dead so he could live for you!

You are a sheep in the flock of the most faithful Shepherd! What a privilege to be his precious lamb! How comforting to know that he will care for you every day of your life and will bring you home to heaven someday! May the Shepherd who laid down his life and took it back up again for you keep you close to his heart in the safety of his everlasting arms. **CIR HIRI!** Amen.