

“A Shepherd to Lead Us”

Date: May 7, 2017

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: John 10:1-10

Theme: shepherd, leadership

Occasion: Easter 4

Leadership: We all want good leadership. Good shepherds to lead us in and out of green pastures. We haven't always had good leaders. The trust we place in our leaders can and has been broken. So what are we to do? John 10 holds the answer.

Look at the picture Jesus gives us here in John 10: This wonderful, vivid portrait of a shepherd caring for the flock. The shepherd would lead his sheep out to distant areas and stay there for days. Being a good shepherd, he created a temporary corral, a pen to keep the sheep in, when they were not out grazing.

Using the crude stones of the field, a shepherd could quickly put together such a structure and at night he would lay his body down in the opening of this corral, making himself the door. No sheep could wander away at night unless they stepped over the sleeping shepherd, and no wolf could come in to do harm without waking the shepherd. He is the gate.

Do you see what is happening here? More than any other duty, the goal of the shepherd is to protect the sheep. This is how you know the good shepherd from the bad shepherd. Does the shepherd, does the leader, have the best interests of the people at heart?

How do you know that he or she is a good shepherd? You know by looking at the sheep. Looking at Jesus' teaching here in John 10, I want to ask a few questions and see what the answers might be. The first question is, 'what are the needs of a sheep?'

The first and obvious answer to that question is *protection*. Jesus says that there are predators always trying to get into the sheep pen, trying to devour the sheep: coyotes, bears, or wolves. They will try every trick in the book, like climbing over the walls. Their intent is to steal and rob.

The sheep don't help the situation much, either. I have heard that if two sheep are grazing and a wolf comes up beside them and kills the one, eating it right there, the other sheep will continue grazing, lean over and say, "Pretty good grazing 'round here."

Not only do they need protection from predators, they need protection from themselves. Sheep are creatures of habit – they will graze the same hills until they become desert wastes. To their own destruction, they will not move on.

Sheep are also creatures of bad hygiene: they will pollute their own ground until it is run over with disease and parasites. To their own ill health, they will live in their own filth. They are creatures with heavy coats: their fleece can grow quite long and become weighed down with mud, manure, burrs and debris.

And when they lie down, they can roll over. Once on their back, they cannot right themselves unless a shepherd comes along and puts them back on their feet. To their own destruction, they become burdened with things.

Protection is the first task of the shepherd, because sheep are by nature followers. That's the second thing I want us to see in our text. A story is told of a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application blank, "Are you a leader?"

Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, “No,” and returned the application expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: “Dear applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative they have at least one follower.”

Most of us do not like to think of ourselves as followers. We style ourselves as leaders, but truth be told, the vast majority of us are not. Outside of parenthood, we rarely place ourselves in positions of ultimate care over others.

But Jesus recognizes that we are by nature followers. We need those over us to care for us. Sheep are followers. The voice of the one they know, of the one they recognize, they will follow. But the voice of a stranger, they will not follow.

What are the needs of the sheep? They need to follow someone and they need protection.

The second question then, is this: Who will be given the responsibility to care for these creatures? Will it be a good shepherd or a bad shepherd? *Someone* will step into this void and the health of any flock of sheep depends on the type of person who is over them.

If the shepherd is gentle, kind, intelligent, brave and selfless in her or his devotion to the flock, the sheep will thrive. If the shepherd is cruel, inattentive, haphazard and selfish, the sheep will struggle and starve. Their hardship will know no end.

We read further, in verse 11 and 12, where Jesus contrasts the good shepherd with a temporary shepherd who is a hired hand.

Jesus says these shepherds are not fully committed to their cause because they do not own the sheep. Have you ever been *fully* committed to a cause? Have you had *full* ownership of some project or program?

If you have, then you know what our Lord is talking about. Who puts in the most hours? Works the hardest? Worries the most? Cares the deepest? It is the owner. Not the hired hand. Jesus says when they see the wolves coming they leave the sheep and run away.

Let us be candid. Not all of those who are appointed as pastors have the people's best interest at heart. There are some who are filled with their own sinful desires and they are a danger to their flock. It is a pity but it is true. But let us also be realistic.

Mistakes do not mean a pastor is a failure. Anyone, even the greatest religious leaders will fall or fail. But when a pastor, or leader, puts his or her flock at risk, they are no longer fit to be a shepherd.

So let me ask the third and final question: What are the traits of an effective shepherd? Many traits could be listed, but I like what former President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said: "In order to be a leader, a person must have followers. And to have followers, that person must have their confidence. Hence the supreme quality of a leader is un-questionably integrity. Without it, no real success is possible."

Books have been written about the traits needed to be a good leader, but none seem willing to go as far as Jesus did. He always had a way of summing up the meaning of a thing. For example, he

took the Ten Commandments and said, “Love God and love your neighbor and you will fulfill the Law.

When the disciples said, how do we pray, he said, “When you pray, say, “Our Father, hallowed be thy name....”

So then, he looks out at the people and he sees that they have had bad shepherds, and he says, “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”

You can't argue with that. That is true leadership. We all will spend our lives trying to be imitators of Christ, whether we are leaders or we are followers.

We all want a leader: A shepherd to lead us; Someone we can trust; Someone who has our best interest at heart; Someone who will not disappoint.

I offer you Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd.

And now may God bless the sheep in the church, and all those who shepherd. Amen.