

“How Would You Describe Yourself?”

John 10:11-18

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If you were going to use one word or phrase to describe yourself, what would it be? This is not as easy as it sounds, is it? Most of us would have to think about this for some time before answering.

I suspect Jesus did, too, which led not merely to one descriptive word or phrase but many as recorded in the gospel of John.

“I am...the Bread of Life (6:35)...the Light of the World (8:12)...the Gate (10:9)...the Good Shepherd (10:11)...the Resurrection and the Life (11:25)...the Way the Truth and the Life (14:6)...the Vine (15:5).

Each of these metaphors was used by Jesus to help his disciples and the religious leaders understand who he was and what he was sent by God to do. As you would expect, they opened the eyes of some who heard him and led to more confusion on the part of others.

Our attention this morning is drawn to the fourth metaphor, “I am the good Shepherd.” Actually, Jesus said this twice in our text, which gives us an indication of how important this particular metaphor was.

“I am the good Shepherd,” Jesus said. “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. The wolf attacks the sheep and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

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, and I lay down my life for the sheep. 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.

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. This commandment I received from my Father.” (John 10: 11-18)

What was Jesus trying to communicate to his listeners that day? What did he want them to know about him by using this metaphor of the good Shepherd?

I believe Jesus wanted them to know nothing was more important to him than people and building healthy relationships based upon respect, love, compassion and integrity.

So important were people and their well-being to Jesus that this priority shaped and molded the kind of leader he endeavored to be. He would use his authority to pursue justice so life would be better for all people. He would use his influence to bring people together by building bridges of understanding, goodwill and reconciliation instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate. He would use his power to protect people when their lives were threatened, and under no circumstances would he desert or abandon them.

I believe Jesus was heavily influenced by the writings of the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel lived about six hundred years before Jesus and was greatly disturbed by the selfish behavior and deceptive ways of the religious authorities and teachers of his day.

“Woe to the prophets of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat curds, clothe yourselves with wool and slaughter choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock.

You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered all over the mountains and on every hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched for them or looked for them.

This is what the sovereign Lord says, ‘I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.’ (34:2-6, 10)

Jesus was determined not to become the selfish, greedy, manipulative, power-hungry shepherd Ezekiel described and some of his peers were. He chose, instead, to become an advocate for the people by calling upon these corrupt leaders to repent and quit ignoring or exploiting the people they were called by God to serve.

You can imagine how this went over with the religious leaders who were not good shepherds. Jesus posed a threat to them, and they reacted by seeking to arrest and silence him.

Jesus was fully aware of the resistance he would face on this journey to make hope visible. This was why he repeatedly referred to the sacrifices he was willing to make in order to be a good shepherd. Four times in our text Jesus said he would “give up” his life, if necessary, to protect and take care of his sheep.

Surely, this helps us to understand the role that making sacrifices plays in developing healthy relationships. Without all parties in a relationship making sacrifices, the relationship will grow toxic and self-destruct.

In light of this, what do you need to give up this week for the sake of a relationship? What could you 'lay down' which would strengthen the relationship you have with your mate, your children, your parents, a neighbor or a friend?

Is it a desire to be in control of everything and everyone around you?

Is it a critical spirit, bad attitude or the need to always be 'right'?

Is it jealousy, a bad temper or an addiction?

Is it bad memories, hurt feelings and the need to punish someone for mistakes they have made?

Is it misplaced priorities and values which have shaped you to be like the bad shepherds Jesus talked about in this passage?

Perhaps I need to ask the question another way. **What are you unwilling to give up that could strengthen a vital relationship?** Why have you not done this?

Do you have a valid reason? Are you being stubborn or wise by refusing to give up something that is undermining the relationship?

I've discovered the reason I was reluctant to make some of the sacrifices I should have made was because my decisions were driven by pride and selfishness rather than my concern for the well-being of others and our relationship. I was thinking only of myself, which was contrary to the nature of Christ revealed in our text.

I believe this passage is calling all of us to be good shepherds as we go about our daily lives. When we use our influence, authority and power to nurture, nourish, guide, protect, heal, teach and encourage others, we not only follow Jesus' example but also contribute to the health of our relationships.

Who are the good shepherds around you, especially in your family? What differences have they made in your life? Do you think anyone sees you as a good shepherd?

What changes do you need to begin making today in order to be a good shepherd or become a better one? Let me encourage you to take those first steps this week. I assure you God will help you just as God helped Jesus.