

The Good Shepherd **John 10:11-18**

Intro

It's Good Shepherd Sunday today. We often confess that Jesus Christ is our shepherd. One of all time favorite bible verses is Psalm 23, 'the Lord is my shepherd.' But when you hear the word "shepherd," what image actually comes to your mind? Because I grew up in and mostly lived in cities, I did not have a chance to meet any shepherds. The only shepherd I met during my life was a person at a sheep show, in Rotorua, New Zealand during my honeymoon. Since I grew up watching a picture of Jesus gently holding a lamb [ppt1], I unconsciously develop a certain image of shepherd like a shepherd in this picture. But the shepherd I met at New Zealand looked very different from my expectation. He was a good-looking guy and he had spotless blue jeans, luxurious leather boots and a nice cowboy hat. I was surprised that he could shear a sheep in less than 2 minutes. On that farm, thousands of sheep peacefully fed themselves on a vast green pasture. Sheepdogs gently herded the sheep as necessary. [ppt 2]

Perhaps, we are so familiar with this image of shepherds in the modern sheep industry that we may not be able to understand Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." We know that a shepherd would protect their sheep since they are important property. But no shepherd would lay down their life for the sheep. Jesus words, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" does not really make sense to us.

I was able to understand this biblical passage better after I watched a documentary film about the life of a Bedouin shepherd in the Middle East. [ppt 3] The Bedouin is a group of nomadic people who live in desert regions. Since there is not enough pasture in those barren lands, they have to lead their sheep to green pastures and water. Shepherds often have to camp in the middle of rocky wilderness for weeks with their sheep. Before the shepherd sleep, they tie their legs to the leg of the leader-sheep with a rope so that they will be woken up if the flock begin to wander off. A shepherd literally lives with the sheep. They walk together, stay together, sleep together and live together. The shepherd spends so much time with his sheep that he develops a deep knowledge of his lambs. For a shepherd, the sheep becomes a part of his extended family rather than mere economic property. "Loving" and "Knowing" the sheep distinguishes a true shepherd from a hired hand. By using this familiar image of the shepherd in Palestine, Jesus told his listeners who he was.

Jesus, the Good Shepard, knows us

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father". . . My sheep listen to my voice." (John 10:14) The point here is that the good shepherd and his sheep know each other to the most minute detail.

There are many different ways of knowing a person. I assume you all know of George Washington, the first President of the United States. I believe you also know your children very well, their characteristics and what they like or dislike. You even know moments that your children cannot remember. Right?

You know both George Washington and your children, but the way of knowing them is not the same. If your children know you in the same way that you know George Washington, it would make you very sad. Also, even if you know George Washington well, you would not lay down your life to defend his reputation while you would do your best to help your children even

if you do not completely understand what they are doing. The difference between your way of knowing George Washington and knowing your children is intimacy. Your knowing of your children involves a strong emotional tie with them. And that makes your knowledge of your children completely different from your knowledge of Washington.

Just as you know your children and they know you, Jesus knows his sheep, and his sheep know him. This intimate relationship between Jesus and his disciples... the intimate relationship between God and Jesus... can be described in one word, "Love." Again and again, the Bible reminds us the most simple but the most powerful truth that Jesus loves us!

The Good Shepherd Love Us in Action

This love is more than just words. Jesus' love for us is not through words but actions. It is one thing to say, "I love you" but it is another thing to live by the words "I love you." Love in action is much more difficult than love in word. I learned this 14 years ago.

A week before Juhee and I got married, I was giving Juhee an acupuncture facial massage at Juhee's home. As you can imagine, I loved Juhee so much that I said, "I will give you a facial massage every day after we get married." I was not joking. I really meant it. My mother-in-law happened to hear my words and said, "Just treat her well now. I am sure that you will not give her facial massage that often after you get married." I was serious at that time so I affirmatively said, "I will definitely keep my word." Do you know what happened? My mother-in-law's prophecy has been fulfilled. She knew me better than myself. After the first couple of weeks, I rarely gave Juhee facial massages. I learned that love in action is much more difficult than love in words.

But, it is completely another thing to die for someone whom you love. We all know that even if we dearly love someone, it would not be easy to lay down our lives for someone whom we love. But Jesus laid down his life for us and this is how we know love. Christians know love because we have been loved in the most profound way imaginable. Because of Jesus's love for us, we are able to know love and we are able to love those around us. And I believe that this love is what we desperately need in our broken and divided world that is fueled by hatred and bigotry especially during this time of the covid-19 pandemic.

Jesus' love does not set the boundary but broaden the boundary of love

We need love... but the love we need is not just any love but the love of Jesus Christ. Love could heal broken relationships and divisions in our society. But love can also foster hatred toward others. You may have heard the saying, "Charity begins at home." But if we only focus on the well-being of our family, our kin, our friends, our church and our group... that love can actually create a boundary between in-groups and out-groups. In-group love can easily turn to hatred and violence toward out-groups. Ethnic cleansing in Syria, Rwandan Civil War between the Hutu and Tutsi groups are explicit examples of how distorted in-group love can have a devastated impact on a society. Is America better than those country? 'America First,' a strong anti-Muslim sentiment, increasing Sinophobia... there are many examples that show how our in-group love fosters outgroup-hate in the United States.

But Jesus' love does not fortify only in-group love. Jesus' love does not build a fence between your people and my people. The love of Jesus broadens the boundary of love. In verse 16, Jesus said, "I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep fold. I must lead them too." Those in the sheepfold are people who believe in Jesus whereas the other sheep refer to those who do not believe in him yet. Jesus didn't want to build a strong wall that secured the safety and

prosperity for only his disciples and his followers. Rather, Jesus as the good shepherd goes out into the field, searches for lost sheep and invites them into his flock.

Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors

Belonging to Jesus' flock of sheep does not mean staying in a safe and comfortable pen. Quite contrary to this, being one of Jesus' sheep means to follow the lead of the good shepherd. Sometimes, we can enjoy the green pastures and still waters. But sometimes, we have to take the risk of walking through the darkest valleys to follow our shepherd. What we need is faith in the good shepherd who loved us so much that he even willingly laid down his life to protect his sheep.

Also, as Jesus Christ loves us and others through his action, by following our good shepherd, we need to love our neighbors, especially those who are ignored and overlooked. One way to follow Jesus in this unusual time is to serve those who are suffering in dire conditions. As you may have read in one of my weekly newsletters in April, many people in Guatemala are suffering from dire food shortages due to Covid-19. Even under normal circumstances, many poor families can barely manage to feed their children. But the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed them to the verge of starvation. What they eat during the food shortage is a piece of tortilla with salt. If they don't have enough grain to eat three times a day, they have a late breakfast and early dinner. Then they go to bed early to endure their hunger." Think of how parents must feel about their children going to bed hungry.

At this point, we may be tempted to say, "we should feed Americans first. There are thousands of hungry kids here and we need to feed hungry Americans first." This is love that creates a boundary. But our good shepherd doesn't build a boundary but broadens the boundary of love. We need to find a way to help our neighbors both near and far.

I am glad that Asbury UMC wants to feed hungry children in Guatemala. I have received a wonderful email from the missionary working for Healing Guatemala. He has already received a donation from one Asbury church member and he is grateful to Asbury UMC's willingness to help people in Guatemala especially during this difficult time. During the financial committee meeting, I have heard that one church member has already expressed his willingness to tithe his economic stimulus check for Healing Guatemala. If you are not able to support them financially, that's o.k. You can support them through your prayers "Charity begins at home but should not end there." As our good shepherd leads us, draw the circle of love wider and wider! We may feel that we are walking through a dark valley. But my friends, don't be afraid. Our good shepherd is with us and his rod and his staff, they protect us.

With that faith, let us boldly take steps to follow our Lord. Let us follow the way that he shows us, the way of boundary-breaking love to find the lost sheep and invite them into Jesus's flock. Our God is good. All the time. Put your trust in our good shepherd and follow his way of love. God will be with us all. Amen.