

4th Sunday of Easter

Senior Preacher: Oliver Yocum

Text: John 10: 11–18 (Jesus: I am the Good Shepherd)

April 21, 2024

Good Morning everyone, it's so good to see you all on this Sunday Morning.

Sundays for me aren't much of a day of rest at Northwestern. I'm usually Here, run off to Solar Car until 5, and try to get a bite to eat in before I start my mountain of work that week after week mysteriously ends up unfinished by Sunday evening. But this week, I'm preaching. I get to slow down a bit.

When writing this sermon, this text reminded me so much of the little picture bible stories you might see in a Sunday school or church childcare room. I distinctly remember the imagery of Jesus with his shepherd's crook and all the fluffy clouds of sheep all around him in cartoon shapes and colors. I remember flipping through those pages and thinking of how good of a leader Jesus must have been to get all those sheep to listen. Ah, the good old days of Sunday school.

Reading this text now, though, gives me much more to think about with the specific language Jesus uses, but really the main message and imagery still rings true. This story encapsulates Jesus's teaching about who he is and what his relationship with humanity is.

In this text, we find a whole bunch of characters. We've got the shepherd, of course, but also the thief, the bandit, the strangers, the gatekeeper, the hired hand, the wolf, and the sheep.

I was struck initially by the characters of the thief, bandit, and wolf, all seeming to wreak havoc on the flock of sheep. They each have their turn in the text, but at the end of it all, it is the shepherd that gets most of the focus. Any threats that these possess are quite immediately overshadowed by Jesus, who directly states his roles in this comparison clearly. Jesus, as our shepherd, is caring, protecting, and loving. He watches over us and keeps us safe, guiding us towards open pastures and away from the risk of thieves and wolves.

This especially comes in the form of Jesus' "I am" statements. He says "I am the gate" and "I am the Good Shepherd", repeating each phrase multiple times in this chapter of John. These are such definitive statements, concrete, sure and patient. Despite the failure of the Pharisees to grasp his comparisons initially, Jesus restates his roles as the shepherd and gate, drawing on the authority He holds through God and through his relationship with each person.

It's so interesting to me that Jesus chooses this analogy, too, to explain his authority. Again, you see that he describes himself not as a gilded king or glorious emperor, but a humble, caring, loyal shepherd. So loyal, in fact, that Jesus would lay down his life for

the flock, only to pick it up again. There is no threat, whether it be wolf, stranger, or thief, that can cause Jesus to leave our side. He is ever present, and victorious over death and sin with his choice to lay down his life.

And as we've been talking about recently in 21theo, this is the story of the theology of the cross! With meekness, boundless love, and triumph over death, Jesus continually shows us that his power comes from no conventional idea of authority, but from God directly.

As Jesus discusses laying down his life for the sheep, we hear "I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father." This proclamation strengthens the fact that Jesus is wholly divine and wholly human. It is with this unique relationship that we can rest easy knowing that we are understood and recognized for all of who we are by Jesus, and that there are no bounds on God's love. Just as all the flock is known, so are we all known. We are the flock! And it is in this shared relationship and identity that we can find unity. It is God's wish that there is "one flock and one shepherd," so the way that we can exemplify this is by breaking down barriers that may separate us from others. Like we've been mentioning with the ELCA statement on civic life.

I think now more than ever, the ability of the body of Christ and the world community at large to yearn for oneness is so incredibly important. In a country where year after year the party line is drawn deeper in the sand, we must be proactive in seeing each other as part of the same flock.

My mind also goes to the War in Gaza. Hearing and seeing the widespread death and destruction occurring on a daily basis is sickening, but perhaps even more sickening is the denial of the humanity of those who have died in the conflict. In the face of such violence and callousness, Jesus leads by example. He is the caring shepherd, instilling us with an identity as one flock, yet we must be the ones to translate this identity into action.

I want to make the distinction that the pursuit of oneness does not mean homogeneity of thought or a placating compromise on important issues. Oneness spurs from the truth that Jesus knows each and every person personally, and no child of God should be overlooked, understated, or turned away from abundant life. With these divisions so ingrained in our lives now, hearing this message of radical oneness and reconciliation is a breath of fresh air, showing a path forward where there is hope to mend relationships that have been torn and friendships that have faded.

For me, LCMNU has been so integral to forming an identity built on something strong and lasting, and even though my time at Northwestern is drawing to a close, I know that this is always a place where I will be welcomed. It is at LCMNU that I have realized how often Jesus subverts expectations in every aspect of who he is, even in commonly told passages like the Good Shepherd. Throughout scripture, he upends the status quo and brings to light the same hypocrisies and divides we experience today. I really thank this

ministry for creating this opportunity to learn more, and absolutely thank Tomás and Anika, and now Sophie and Cole, for their incredibly important roles in cultivating this community in 21theo. Each time I come to the center, I am always reminded of the incredible power of community that has given me so much and that I hope I can give back to.

For the seniors in particular, there are big changes on the horizon. We'll be exiting the Northwestern bubble and engaging with entirely different communities all over again. But no matter the chaos and upheaval you may face in the next years as you start anew, Jesus is there to guide us and call us. And it is through this call from the shepherd that we must know that we will also be surprised.

All this to say, the voice of Jesus is one of familiarity, even if we may not be able to see Him clearly. He has known us since we were formed, so the call of His voice is one that we recognize and can parse from the distinctly different calls of the other drivers in life. The thief and the bandit mentioned today are also the false promises of fulfillment we hear through power, success and notoriety that permeate our lives, especially at an institution like Northwestern. Where Jesus again contests these false promises is in his statement that "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Jesus lays down his life for us to have this opportunity to live it to the full, so let us not take the opportunity lightly. Let us be ambitious in our pursuit of abundant life and heed the familiar call of the shepherd, wherever we may be when we hear it.

Happy Sunday everyone, He is Risen!