

A sermon preached on April 25, 2021 based upon John 10:11-18 entitled, “Shepherds, Hired Hands, Wolves and Sheep”.

You may remember Fred Coleman who left this world a few years back to be with God but was an important part of our church’s life for many years. When Fred retired, I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. How would he like to come down to the office several days a week to be our “officer minister”? We couldn’t pay him anything, but there would be plenty of fringe benefits – plenty of bathroom breaks, stuff like that.

And so Fred began to do just that. He’d answer the phones, chat with people. People would stop by to get his counsel. Fred would be the first to admit he wasn’t a perfect man, but he had a significant capacity for love.

In his early years serving as Office Minister Fred wore a suit. He really looked the part of a pastor. In contrast, my inclination has always been to wear a tie only on Sundays. I had this running joke with Fred that involved a bizarre fantasy. One day a lunatic would storm into the office with the intention of taking out a pastor. (I don’t know – maybe he’s angry with God or something.) With a gun in hand, the lunatic looks at the two of us asking, “Who’s the pastor?” I point at Fred. “He’s wearing the suit,” I’d say. “He’s obviously the pastor.” And then Fred would take a bullet for me. In the running fantasy joke, Fred was a good shepherd who lays down his life for me, the sheep. I was the sheep, but a sheep with a hired hand mentality.

A true shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the flock he or she loves; the hired hand is just in it for the money.

In my experience as a “pastor” I shift back and forth between a hired hand mentality and that of a true pastor. If they were honest, I think most pastors would agree they do the same. It’s easier in some ways to treat my work as simply a job. There is a lot of pain out there hidden inside my congregation, and in the hired hand mentality I can wall myself off from all the pain. Ultimately, however I find the job mentality far more difficult because it puts my focus on success. I stress out over what people are thinking about my performance? How is the institution of the church doing? Are we making our budget? Bringing in new members? There are lots of things to feel anxious about when I treat my work as merely a job.

But when I return to the mentality of a pastor, my singular focus is to be an instrument of God’s love and care for the people in my congregation. It can be quite painful at times, but the anxiety falls away. I know what I’m about.

If Pastors are the only ones doing “God’s work”, then heaven help us. Whether you view your life’s work as merely a job or a vocation – a calling from God is critical. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we all have a holy calling to be channels of God love with the people we encounter in life.

If you’re a parent, you know the difference between your kid’s teacher doing their job merely for a paycheck and a pension and the teacher embracing a holy calling to be a shepherd of the children under their care. A teacher embracing the vocation of teaching truly loves your child, willingly making sacrifices on their behalf.

Consider the life of a police officer. A police officer who sees his or her work as a holy calling understands that they are here to serve their community in a wide variety of ways. They treat all people with dignity and respect. Such police officers are true heroes – public servants providing security and stability to our community. I’ve been blessed to know several such police officers.

In contrast, a police officer who is drawn to the job primarily because they get off having power is a dangerous thing indeed. Unfortunately, it is because too many policeman hold such a mentality – and the culture that supports it – is why we find ourselves in the national crisis expressed in the George Floyd trial.

But what if your job isn’t directly tied to service? Let’s say you work in an office and you didn’t take the job because the company is doing some sort of particularly noble work -- you simply needed a job to pay the bills. Can you still have a calling? Absolutely, because a calling ultimately involves our relationship with whoever it is that God places in our path.

More than any other factor, whether a person likes or dislikes their job comes down to a single factor: the quality of the relationships among the people in their work place. Do people care about one another, not just as efficient employees but as whole people possessing an inherent dignity? Do people carry a sense of calling into their jobs, or not?

A single person who views their workplace as a vocation – a way to serve God by serving people – can significantly impact the entire atmosphere of a workplace. Caring for others becomes contagious.

When somebody says they “hate” their job, I suspect they are primarily speaking about the lack of care and respect they experience there.

Being able to move towards a “shepherd” mentality as opposed to a “hired hand” mentality is critical because ultimately what we are all seeking in life is not really money or status -- we are seeking a sense of deep meaning and purpose to our lives – a strong reason to get out of bed in the morning. Hired hands don’t know what that feels like.

The next image is that of the wolf. Actual wolves out in the wild get a bad rap. They are predators, doing what they are designed to do so they aren’t really good or evil. Nonetheless Jesus uses the standard Disney version of a wolf as viscous and cruel to talk about people who have in some sense lost their souls and been taken possession of by evil. In the verse immediately before our reading, Jesus declares that he has come to give life and give it abundantly. A wolf is somebody who whether consciously or unconsciously is actively seeking to the opposite: to destroy life.

How common are such people? I don’t know – and we should be very cautious about labelling somebody as evil as opposed to being a run-of-the-mill sinner like the rest of us. But I suspect evil people are more common than we often realize. They can be found anywhere, embracing

the whole gamut of political ideologies and religions. Sometimes their evil is tied up with some kind systemic evil – an institutional culture that actively seduces people to get caught up in the oppression of people. An extremely toxic work environment or family life could pose such a threat.

Could you or I be, or become wolves? Hopefully not. But in truth, we've all danced at times with the wolf identity, because wherever hatred has taken hold of us, the wolf nature finds a foothold inside us. It's something about which we need to be vigilant. If hateful thoughts come to dominate our minds, it's time to reach out for help.

This is why Jesus put such a premium on forgiveness – including it in the Lord's Prayer. When we forgive someone, we are refusing to let the evil that is hatred take up residence inside us. We do it for ourselves as much as for the person who has wronged us. It is also what Jesus was getting at when he instructed us to pray, "Deliver us from evil." We're not really asking God to protect us from ever having harm done to us. The one who gave us these words died nailed to a cross. We pray "deliver us from evil" to seek divine grace to help us let go of hatred. But you might say it's right to hate what is evil. As someone once said though, "If you hate what is evil more than you love the good all you end up becoming is a damn good hater."

The last image Jesus uses is that of sheep. Throughout the Bible, we human beings are referred to being "sheep." In contrast to the adorable images we may have in our heads of little lambs, in truth being called a sheep isn't exactly a compliment. There are two qualities that stand out about sheep.

The first is, they aren't the sharpest tools in the shed. They get lost easily. They've got a stubborn streak – they don't like to be pushed and yet ultimately sheep are followers. They need a good shepherd to lead them or they'll get lost.

We may not like to think of ourselves this way, but truth is, we're not as smart as we often like to think we are. In human interactions our tendency is to claim more knowledge than we actually possess regarding what's going on – what's motivating people – what's motivating us. When it comes to our opinions about politics and other such things, we like to think that we're carefully thought through our opinions rationally and come to the correct opinion, which is quite simply hogwash. The primary determining factor regarding the opinions we hold is the particular flock with which we hang. We absorb the way our family, our friends think. And what we see regarding "the truth" is always a piece of the picture but far from the whole picture. Typically, though we don't acknowledge how limited our grasp is of the truth.

The other significant quality of sheep is that they are inherently vulnerable and fragile. They need to be a part of a flock. On its own, a sheep will get lost and if it stays lost it will die. So to call we human beings sheep is to say we are inherently fragile – more fragile than we care to admit. If we're feeling pretty sturdy at the moment and find it hard to identify with a vulnerable

sheep the truth we may not what to own up to is that it wouldn't take much for any of us to have our world utterly rocked. Whatever sturdiness we have is by the grace of God.

So, to embrace our sheep identity is to acknowledge that we don't know as much as we'd like to think we do, and that there is a great fragility to our lives – a fragility that actually connects us to all other human beings. It is to acknowledge we all need the Good Shepherd, who is Jesus.

In our passage this morning we just heard Jesus speak one particularly puzzling line. He's speaking to his disciples: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. (*"Whose these other sheep he's talking about who aren't a part of our fold?" the disciples must have asked themselves.*) I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

Who are these other sheep who don't belong to our fold but which Jesus desires to bring into his one great flock? This is a question we are called to wrestle with throughout our lives. Who are we overlooking, perhaps excluding?

Every single person on the face of the earth is one of Jesus' lambs, though the great majority of us are only dimly aware of this at best. Many of Jesus' lambs are very lost and have not yet learned to listen for Jesus' voice – the voice of love – calling them home. In chapter 12 Jesus goes on to say, "*When I am lifted up (that is, nailed to the cross) I will draw **all** people to myself.*" It's an ongoing process, but we have a calling to participate in Jesus' desire to unify all people in his great love.

We live in this deeply divided country that pressures us to choose which side are we on. The focus of this divide recently is whether we are on the side of poor Black people who have a long history of oppression in our country, or are we on the side of the police and the very difficult challenges of their important work.

I would suggest being a Christian means rejecting the choice to take sides.

I have a hero in this regard. His name was Will Campbell. I have a couple of things in common with Will Campbell. Although he was born about thirty years before me, we were both born white folk in Mississippi (though I moved up north when I was just 5) and we both went to the same seminary.

Will began his ministry in the deep south as a Baptist preacher during the height of the civil rights movement. He spent a year pastoring a congregation but his tendency to talk about the civil rights movement which was just getting underway got him kicked out of his church after about a year. Thereafter he lived on a farm and became what he called a "bootleg preacher" wandering about the south in the role of a shepherd to the people engaged in the civil rights movement.

Will was in Little Rock in 1957 walking beside the young black students as they walked through the dark valley of the frothing mob threatening them with violence as they blazed the path of integration in the local high school.

Will was there with the Freedom Riders in 1961 and with the Birmingham marchers in 1963.

He was a close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and was the only white man involved in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference that provided leadership for the Civil Rights Movement. Will wept when Dr. King was assassinated.

Now all of what I have told you is reason enough to call Will Campbell a hero, but the reason I am lifting him up today has to do with how his live story proceeded from there.

After King's assassination, the Black leadership of the Civil Rights Movement became more radicalized which involved becoming less welcoming to the assistance of white people like Will. Understandably, they wanted Black people to take full responsibility for the fight for their rights. "Go work with your own people," Will was told.

Will took this to heart. The focus of his work began to transition to another flock of sheep. Remarkably, Will became a bootleg preacher – a shepherd -- to the...Klansmen – typically poor white people at the bottom of the southern class system -- people who had actively, often violently resisted integration. Will had grown up among such people and understood them. He recognized them as people who had suffered in their own ways -- people who felt threatened by change. He never condoned their bigoted views or the violence they committed. Quietly he did what he could to change the way they saw things.

Just as Will had gained the trust of black people leading the Civil Rights Movement, now he gained the trust of poor white Klansmen. He visited James Earl Ray – Dr. King's assassin -- in prison. The new form his calling took was seen as a betrayal among many white liberals. "It's been a long time since I got a hate letter from the right," Will said at one point. "Now they come from the left."

His response to these criticisms was simple. "The same Bible that tells me I should be against segregation tells me God loves everybody." Hate, it seemed to Campbell, was the cause of all the problems. Hate was the enemy. And hate has no color.

Will Campbell was highly educated and knowledgeable of many things, and yet the most commonly heard words to come out of his mouth were, "I don't know." He lived with great humility. The one bedrock certainty of his life was this: God loves everybody, in spite of all failings.

There's a story about Will Campbell attending a lengthy trial for a Klansman who had committed the murder of a black man. Throughout the breaks of the trial, Will would alternate

spending his time with the grieving family members of the man who had been murdered, expressing care and love, and with the man on trial and his family, doing the same.

A newspaper reporter took note of Will's pattern of switching back and forth from side to side and kept badgering him about what in his eyes was an inexplicable inconsistency. One day the reporter cornered Will in the hallway outside the courtroom. "You can't be for both the murderer and for his victims. Explain yourself!" Generally a man of extreme patience, Will finally lost his patience and swore, "I do it because I'm a (blankety-blank) Christian, that's why!" With that he walked away.

To listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd means that we realize that we recognize that both George Floyd and Derek Chauvin are Jesus' sheep, and he intends to lead them safely home. He intends for us to participate in what he came to do -- reconcile the world to Himself and to one another.

You too have a holy calling -- follow the Good Shepherd.