

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
I Am the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
April 25, 2021

Exodus 34:20-31; John 10:11-21

I want to begin this morning by reading from one of America's greatest living theologians, Garrison Keillor. It is from his short piece called Earl Grey. *"Earl Grey was a middle child, the third in a family of five, so he was accustomed to suffering. When he was small, his family often forgot to call him to the table for meals. He was a tall boy with size 12 shoes, a hard one to overlook, but they did, all the time. Sometimes, they called him 'Vern' by mistake, and when he corrected them, they said, 'Oh well. Whatever.' Pardon a digression here, but as a middle child himself, the author is moved to elaborate. In other cultures, middleness is not a losing position, perhaps because those cultures are less linear, more circular than ours. For example, in Sumatra a middle child is cherished as the bright jewel of the family and is referred to as 'our central child' ... The middle child is the normal, friendly one. So the middle child is ignored: because he or she is so nice and requires no special attention. The middle child is a stranger to his parents. Earl Grey liked to bring a fresh pot of tea to his mom and dad as they sat in the Walnut Room of their spacious mansion in Chevy Chase and rested from the day's labours. 'Oh, thanks, Vern,' they said. 'Here's a quarter.'"* (from *The Book of Guys* by Garrison Keillor, Penguin Group, 1994)

Have any of you ever felt like a middle child? Have any of you ever walked into a room filled with people having a great time, talking, and chatting only to feel as if you are invisible? If you haven't I have. Since I am not a party in a box, there have been many times in my life when I have been someplace new, where everyone seemed to know everyone else, and I felt as if, even at 6'3" and 200lbs, I was invisible. It is a disconcerting experience. And I believe it is a disconcerting experience because deep inside every human being is the fear of being invisible. It is the fear that we don't really matter; that our existence in the universe is not noticed and so perhaps we never existed at all. I realize that this sort of reflection might seem a bit odd for looking at Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Yet, I believe in many ways they lie at the heart of this part of his identity. I say that because his audience didn't just consist of some of the religious elite but of ordinary folks; men, women and children who wondered everyday if their heavenly parent had forgotten them. As if they were somehow no longer special but were middle children without a name. It is to that issue of being invisible that we turn. And to do so, this sermon will be like a series of building blocks that seeks to help us deal as well with our Middle Child Syndrome.

The first block begins with understanding just what a good shepherd is. First the term good shepherd refers not to a good shepherd versus a better or best shepherd. It's not like choosing your medical coverage, gold, silver or pot metal. The word good here refers to a shepherd who is filled with compassion and care for the sheep, he or she watches over. It means a shepherd who is filled with love. This is at the heart of Jesus' words comparing a good shepherd with a hired hand. The hired hand is only in shepherding for a paycheck. When trouble comes, a hired hand says, "I am not being paid to deal with this trouble," and takes off. A good shepherd is in shepherding for the love of the sheep. So, when Jesus refers to himself as the good shepherd, he is laying the foundation for the blocks that follow. He is laying a foundation of the good shepherd being the one who loves the sheep.

The second block is that a good shepherd knows their sheep. A good shepherd knows each sheep by name, personality, disposition, and place in the sheep hierarchy. The good shepherd knows which sheep can be easily

frightened, which sheep will run away, which sheep will bully other sheep and which sheep will be sheepish. I must admit I find this rather amazing because when I look at a flock of sheep all I see is, well, sheep. They all look alike to me. But to a good shepherd the sheep are not just a means of production or income, they are instead an extended family, to be known, loved, and cared for. With that in mind, listen again to Jesus. *“I am the good shepherd. I know my own.”* What he is telling the crowd is that he knows those whom God has given to him. He knows us. He knows all of us. This means that Jesus knows us in more than a name-tag sort of way. Not only does he know us by name; he knows our fears and our failings. He knows our hopes and our dreams. He knows who we are at our very core...and he loves us, faults and all. The Good Shepherd knows us.

The next block is that the good shepherd knows what sheep need. If we can recall the 23rd Psalm, we will remember that the shepherd is the one who makes the sheep lie down in green pastures and leads them beside the still waters. The good shepherd understands that sheep, left to their own devices, will graze the land bare and starve to death. Or the sheep will fall into running water and drown. Ezekiel, writing about the good shepherd hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, puts it this way. *“I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil; and they shall know that I am the Lord... will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land...”* Jesus as the good shepherd knows what we need. He knows that we need freedom from want, fear or failure. And so, Jesus leads us and teaches us. Jesus supports us and provides for us a community of support. Jesus forgives us and renews us. Jesus loved us enough to become one of us, so that we might follow him into the way of life. The Good Shepherd knows what we need.

The fourth block is that the good shepherd knows the cost of protecting the sheep. Sheep are fungible, meaning they can be stolen and sold. Sheep are also tasty. Both of these factors make sheep a target for rustlers and varmints. They are a target for rustlers because those thieves know that there is a market for sheep; a market in which buyers don't ask for title to the sheep. Wolves, lions, and bears are all mentioned in scripture as seeking out sheep for a good meal. And in shepherding communities there are far too many stories of shepherds having to fight off both thieves and predators. The 23rd Psalm speaks of the shepherd's rod and staff protecting. Ezekiel speaks of the good shepherd as the one who will not allow God's people to be plundered for other nations, nor allow the animals of the land to devour them. Jesus implies the same thing not only by comparing himself to the hired hand who runs away at the first sign of danger but by stating that he will give his life to protect his flock. This good shepherd is willing to risk everything, including his own death for the flock.

The final block is that a good shepherd knows their flock. The good shepherd knows, even when flocks are thrown together at a well, which sheep belong to them and which belong to someone else. Jesus's listeners would have assumed that his flock was limited to certain good people, or to Galileans, or perhaps just to the Jewish people because Jesus was a Jewish rabbi. Yet Jesus makes it clear that his flock is larger than that. That in fact there was an entirely different flock for which he was responsible. The traditional way of interpreting these words is that God loves Gentiles just as much as Jews and that Jesus will be their good shepherd as well. What I would like us to hear in these words is something more expansive than this, that Jesus' flock includes people of every age, race, language, income, educational level, gender and sexual orientation. This is the radically expansive nature of Jesus' flock.

The bottom line for Christ's kingdom is that there are no middle children. There is no person unseen, unknown, or unloved. Christ's flock extends around the world and includes each and everyone of us. This week then, my challenge to you is this, that when you look into a mirror you stop and say...God sees me, God knows me, and God loves me.