

“The Beautiful Shepherd”

John 10:1-18

Because of a late Easter, we have the rare occurrence of Good Shepherd Sunday falling on Mother’s Day. So there is the obvious parallel between being a good shepherd and being a good mother.

We’ll begin with Jesus as the Good Shepherd in John 10 and Psalm 23. We’ll end with how we are called to be good shepherds as mothers and fathers and as sons and daughters.

In the chapter immediately preceding our gospel text, Jesus heals a blind man and the Pharisees find themselves struggling to swallow Jesus’ teaching. Jesus couldn’t possibly be saying they’re blind, could he?

Jesus affirms that because they refuse to acknowledge their blindness, because they refuse the light and message of Jesus, they remain in the darkness of their sin. Jesus uses shepherding imagery in order to expose the hardness of their hearts and reveal himself again as the Messiah. In the process, he exposes the beautiful heart of God for each of us in Jesus – the beautiful shepherd.

The Greek word, “kalos”, which translates “good” as in “good shepherd”, can also be translated as “excellent” or “beautiful”. In describing himself as the good shepherd, Jesus reveals himself as the “beautiful shepherd”. The beauty is displayed both in his heart and passion for the sheep as well as his willingness to sacrifice his own life for the sheep.

Jesus’ teaching describes 3 different types of shepherds – thieves, hired hands, and true shepherds.

The thieves don't enter by the gate, the sheep won't follow strangers, and they come only to steal, kill, and destroy.

The hired hands run away when the wolf comes and don't care about the sheep.

True shepherds enter by the gate, call the sheep by name, lead them out, they follow, know his voice, and the true shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep.

The imagery of thieves and hired hands is an indictment against the leaders of Israel who do not really love God and God's people.

In contrast in Psalm 23, when the Lord is our shepherd, we are not in want. He leads us and we follow him to green pastures and still waters. He guides us along right pathways when we choose to accept and follow his guidance. He walks with us through the valleys and the shadows of death in our lives, comforting us along the way. He is with us all the days of our lives. The beautiful shepherd takes us home to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

So if Jesus is the beautiful shepherd confronting the Pharisees for not shepherding their people and if the Lord is our shepherd guiding us through life in Psalm 23, then how do you hear and recognize the beautiful shepherd's voice in your own life?

When I asked that question during our Bible study of John last winter, folks described hearing God's voice in music and worship, through reading scripture or praying. I always suggest that we hear our beautiful shepherd's voice through people close to us and sometimes through people we've never met before.

Steve Junker, a son of Divinity and grieving his father's death, heard the voice of the beautiful shepherd speaking to him as he describes his experience with these words . . .

God taught me a very valuable lesson today. As the weeks have passed . . . thoughts, emotions, and memories have had me thinking about my dad a lot lately. I've felt in a funk, depressed, and unmotivated. I called my mom yesterday and we shared similar feelings. I stopped over to her house today for lunch and to help her declutter and organize some of my dad's old belongings to donate. She mentioned the men's shelter downtown would be a great benefit for my father's clothing and belongings. We gathered up 17 bags of my dad's and my old clothes, jackets, and menswear.

As I pulled up to the building, I noticed several people lining up or surrounding the building. When I opened the back of my Jeep, a worker came out to collect the items. As we were unloading the bags, I hear in the distance a very faint voice "sir, do you have any jackets?" I look over and there was a man that was leaning up against a metal garage door under an over hang. I replied "yes . . . somewhere in these bags, I do."

He looked miserable. I knew I had to find something for him. I tore open the third bag and there was an over sized Carolina Panthers starter jacket that I had when I was in middle school. I gave it to the man and he quickly put it on. As soon as he zipped it up I saw the tears in his eyes. He said "It fits! Young man, thank you so much . . . God bless you!"

I shook his hand and told him I'm glad it could help. I continued to unload the bags and as I got into my car, before I could get my car into drive I had tears rolling down my face. I was so happy to help just that one man, I've never seen the direct impact and how genuinely happy someone could be over things I've taken for granted all my life. It hit me like a ton of bricks.

No matter what we're going through, there's always someone in need. There's always something we can do to help others. Be thankful for everything we have. Surely a moment and lesson I will never forget.

When Steve called his mom to share his feelings it was because he knew from the experience of his life that she is a beautiful shepherd who will listen to her sheep, who knows her sheep's voices, and who will guide them to green pastures, still waters, and right-pathways because that's what moms do. Moms are beautiful shepherds through whom we can hear and recognize God's voice.

We can share a lunch together and go to work decluttering together. 17 bags of Dad's and son's old clothes with the wisdom to take them to the men's homeless shelter where again there is the holy possibility of hearing and recognizing the beautiful shepherd's voice.

A faint voice in the distance, "sir, do you have any jackets?"

A rag man, a cold man, a lonely man, a man in need leaning up against a metal garage door under an overhang. He looked miserable. We recognize his voice and we feel a sense of urgency to respond as quickly as we can.

"Yes, somewhere in these bags, I do". I had to do something for him. A jacket from middle school. He quickly put it on.

How do you hear and recognize God's voice in your own life?

"It fits! Young man, thank you so much. God bless you!"

Mostly, we hear the beautiful shepherd's voice when and where and from whom we least expect it. The beautiful shepherd finds us much more often than we find him.

The good shepherd seeks out the lost sheep, pursues us when we are lost, speaks to us when we are grieving, and enters into our joy and celebration of mothers and grandmothers, of daughters and granddaughters.

When we're lying down and resting, when we're drinking from clean waters, when our deepest souls are revived, and we are guided on the right path, we might not even notice the presence of the beautiful shepherd. We might not hear any voice from anybody. But he's there. Watching over us. Hoping that we don't do something really stupid that could harm us or harm those around us.

As mothers and fathers, we do our best to raise our children to not make stupid decisions that could harm others or themselves. But no matter how well we raise our children, as my cousin John and his wife Marlene experienced two weeks ago, our children, in their case, their 13 year old son, can make spontaneous decisions and act on them without thinking through the consequences. A 15 year old girl at Valley Forge made the same bad decision 2 days earlier.

The 2 bad decisions were eerily similar. Fighting with the opposite sex through text messages. Acting out their anger and spontaneity by hanging themselves, he in the barn, her in the garage. Parents coming home to find them.

A week ago Friday, I sat in the pew of my home church packed with 7th and 8th graders. Kenny played football and wrestled. His father, my cousin John, is the Junior High head wrestling coach. When John bear hugged me, he whispered in my ear, "I don't understand this." I whispered back, "you never will."

But as people of faith, we believe the beautiful shepherd will give up his own life for his sheep. He will die for us. Then he comes back and leads us one last time through the gate of death to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

May the peace of God . . .

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