

“Lay Down Your Life”

In today’s passage from John 10:11-18, we have the beautiful imagery of Jesus as the Shepherd, the one who looks after his flock, the members of the church. We are given the contrast between the good shepherd and the bad shepherd. We realize from this metaphor that Jesus is willing to lay down his life for his flock. We are also given guidance on how the leaders in our church should be.

Sheep were an important commodity in Jesus’ time (they are important today for economies. Some countries like Ireland, Scotland, and New Zealand, tell us they have more sheep than people). There is a great value given to sheep. In Jesus’ time, if anything happened to the sheep, the shepherd had to produce evidence that it was not his fault (Exodus 22:13). The shepherd was required to give proof that he had been unable to prevent the sheep’s death.

There was constant danger to the sheep. In 1 Samuel 17:34, David tells Saul that when he was keeping his father’s sheep, he had to battle with the lion and the bear. Isaiah speaks of the crowd of shepherds being called out to deal with the lion (Isaiah 31:4) To the shepherd it was the most natural thing to risk his life in defense of the sheep which was his flock.

There were also human dangers to the flock. There was always the concern that thieves and robbers would come to despoil the flock (and they would come!). The shepherd had to be on constant lookout for the danger to the sheep.

The commentator William Barclay discusses the contrast between a real shepherd and a hired hand. A real shepherd was born to the task, sent out to tend the flock as soon as he was old enough to go. He grew into the calling of being a shepherd. The sheep became his friends and companions. It became second nature to think of the sheep before he thought of himself.

A false shepherd came into the job, not as a calling, but as a means of making money. He was in it solely and simply for the money he could get out of it. He had no sense of the responsibility of his calling. He was only a hireling.

It's important how a shepherd responds to the dangers which will come to the flock. In the imagery of the story today, wolves present a serious danger to the flock. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus tells his disciples that he was sending them out as sheep in the midst of wolves. When we do Jesus' work, we will be in the midst of wolves. Jesus, as our shepherd, is there to lay down his life for us and to protect us.

It is so critical that we have Jesus as the true and good shepherd. When wolves attack sheep, the hired shepherd forgets everything but the saving of his own life and runs away. Zechariah marks it as the characteristic of a false shepherd

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that he makes no attempt to gather together the scattered sheep (Zechariah 11:6)

Jesus' point in our story today is that the man who works only for a reward thinks more of money than anything else. The man who works for love thinks more of the people he is trying to save more than anything else. Jesus was the good shepherd, who loved his sheep; for their safety he would lay down his life.

In the Greek there are two words for good. *Agathos* simply describes the moral quality of a thing. *Kalos* is the verb used by John to describe Jesus' goodness. In this goodness there is a loveliness, an attractiveness, which makes it a lovely thing. This is the word which describes Jesus---there is more than efficiency, even more than fidelity. There is a certain loveliness. Sometimes a village or town people speak about the good doctor. When they speak like that they are not thinking only of the doctor's efficiency and skill as a physician; they are thinking of the sympathy and the kindness and the graciousness which he brought with him and which made him the friend of all. In the picture of Jesus as the good shepherd there is loveliness as well as strength and power.

As I reflected on the commitment of Jesus as the good shepherd, it made me think of a story I saw this past week on the World War II effort against Nazi Germany. The Nazis represented a threat to all of humanity and had to be defeated. On June 22, 1941, Germany invaded Russia and initially it looked like the Nazis

were going to win. By that time, Hitler had already conquered continental Europe. Only Great Britain and Russia stood against him. The United States had not yet entered the war. It was critical to supply the Russians with supplies.

The story was about the actress Kristen Scott Thomas learning about her grandfather, who was the captain of a British destroyer. Her grandfather was part of a task force which guarded transport ships and oil tankers which supplied some 4 million tons of supplies (gasoline, ammunition, tanks, food) to the Russians from 1941-43. They went on a hazardous route through the Arctic circle. The conditions were brutal. One could not stay on deck for more than 30 minutes; you could get frostbite or you could literally freeze to death.

In addition to the harsh natural conditions, there was the ongoing danger of the German U-boat submarines. Interestingly called wolfpacks, they provided a constant terror. When a ship was torpedoed and sunk, the survivors were not even rescued because of the danger a rescue mission would bring to the other ships. Men had to literally give up their lives as they froze to death in the cold waters of the Arctic.

These men died for a greater cause, a greater love for humankind. They clearly did not do it for the pay they received. They knew they must save humanity

from the terror of the Nazis. They won, but at the cost of three thousand lives.

These men literally laid down their lives.

In the parable today, the flock is the Church. The flock suffers from a double danger. It is always subject to attack from the outside from wolves and robbers and marauders. But the thing to remember is that is liable to injury from the inside from the false shepherd. A church can suffer from the tragedy of bad leadership, from the disaster of shepherds who see their calling as a career and not as a means of service. The inside problem is even worse, because if the shepherd is faithless and nothing more than a hired hand, foes from the outside can penetrate in and destroy the church. So, we learn that the church's first essential in leadership is that it be based on the example of Jesus Christ.

As we reflect on what it means to lay down one's life for another, what the passage today tells us was that Jesus' death was entirely voluntary. If he wanted to save his life, he could have called down the hosts of heaven to his defense (Matt. 26:53). Before Pilate, Jesus was quite clear that Pilate was not condemning him but that he was accepting death. Jesus voluntarily laid down his life because he chose to do so. The cross was not a threat to him. He willingly accepted it for us.

When I think of what Jesus willingly did for us, I can only think of what health care workers have been doing for so many during the COVID-19 pandemic.

They have gone back and back into situations which they knew held danger for them and their families. It went beyond just being paid for their work. During a stay I had in the hospital emergency room in March 2020 due to my bladder problems, I had a conversation with a male nurse I had met before during my several trips to the emergency room. He was clearly frustrated over what was happening. He did not feel like he and the other staff were getting the physical and emotional support they needed from the hospital to protect them from the constant danger they faced in doing their work. His situation was made more difficult by the fact that his wife was expecting a baby in four weeks. He was clear that he was willing to deal with danger as he cared for his patients, but he did not want to expose his family to health risks. He was clearly a good shepherd but in a very conflicted situation.

As you reflect on today's passage, how far are you willing to go to lay down your life for another? Are you willing to take risks to help others as have many health care workers in the COVID-19 crisis? What about the sacrifices made by those in the cold seas of the Arctic to fight Hitler? And, ultimately, what about Jesus giving his life for all of us, willingly and in love? The Good Shepherd is willing to risk all to protect his flock.