

“Byproducts of the Mob”
John 10:11-18
Fourth Sunday of Eastertide
April 22, 2018
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John 10:11-18 (NIV)

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

You can do a Google search and learn that today is Good Shepherd Sunday because *someone*, in lectionary wisdom, made *the readings for THIS Sunday (usually always this Sunday on the church calendar)* include Psalm 23 AND the verses from John that Ben just read for us.

These two portions of Scripture are familiar and cherished.
There are sheep everywhere today!

Over the centuries, the image of Jesus as the good shepherd and his followers as sheep has been, for whatever reasons, terribly appealing. Even our little church’s legacy of stained glass includes the window that I put on the front of your bulletin. Boy, how I’M BLESSED from this viewpoint (choir too) to see THAT window every Sunday (and the days in between.)

Another Google search with the question “how many good shepherd stained glass windows are there?” yielded one document, 20 pages long, of photos of the famous sheep man. (You really should google and see all the artists’ ideas. Ours still is the best, IMHO!)

The amount of stained glass, paintings, music and poetry that these verses have inspired is staggering!

And the number of sermons, articles, hymns, retreats and meditations devoted to it is probably beyond counting, but God bless Google for trying!

So, whenever any preacher wanders into this particular pasture and wants to try and tackle these particular critters; they gotta watch where they step.

Still, in all the words read and heard on the subject of the Good Shepherd and his sheep, there is one thing that no ones talks about: “Why in the world do shepherds have sheep in the first place?”

Ever thought about that?

I’m hazard a guess that shepherds keep sheep for the same reasons that ranchers keep cows, farmers keep cotton, and the Colonel keeps chickens.

Being a shepherd and taking care of sheep, and being a sheep and having a shepherd, are, sooner or later, going to have something to do with the byproducts they produce: wool and mutton.

That’s a reality that isn’t depicted in stained-glass windows, so keep them in mind: wool and mutton.

It’s good to know there ARE byproducts of the sheep business, because (as popular as they are) sheep are passive, not-so-smart, docile and dull.

So if we’re the “proverbial” sheep of our Lord’s pasture, does that then mean we’re supposed to, like sheep, just hanging around, occasionally get lost, not doing much but looking cute, and being taken care of because there’s no way we could survive for 15 minutes on our own?

Is the whole point of the story that we aren’t worth very much, and that we aren’t very capable?

More facts from Google: the vocation of shepherding is total-self-giving, ‘cause sheep without a shepherd have no natural defense and NEED a shepherd for protection.

Remember, shepherds don't generally keep sheep as pets.
There ARE reasons for the enterprise, and there are expectations, too.
For those in the shepherding business, sheep are useful and necessary.

If the sheep don't produce, the shepherd is out of business.
Which reminds us of the wool and mutton.

And where we come in; in this Good Shepherd business.
It's about what's going on, pertaining to US, in the comfortable talk about green pastures and still waters.

The Lord, the Shepherd, expects us to produce something in this "enterprise" of the Kingdom.
There aren't any contingency plans.

Now, don't misunderstand!
There is NOT any fine print on the promise of Jesus to be our Good Shepherd...
...or that he'll only be the Shepherd for the most useful of the sheep.

We aren't going to be left to the wolves or turned pet food (what does one do with a worthless sheep?) – if we don't produce.

We ARE cared for; we ARE blessed – because Jesus lovingly sacrificed everything for us.

And that sacrifice, love, and continued care are simply gifts.
We'd never have been smart enough to know WHAT to ask for!
They're given without condition or exception.
And there isn't anything we could do for God to give more.
There is no "more."

But, Dear Ones, there are expectations.
There it is! The business of wool and mutton.

Everything that God offers us *is intended* to lead to something.
For us to "produce," as John Wesley wrote, we should:

*Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.*

It's silly, I know, to compare us to sheep.

We're the MOB (yeah, I Googled "another name for a group of sheep") and I'm being silly – we can't make wool; that's not of our nature.

But, it **is** of our nature to worship and to serve;
to reach out and to share;
to study and to pray;
to grow in our faithfulness and to tell the truth;
to seek for justice and to be willing to sacrifice.

It's expected of us.

And remember, I mentioned a couple weeks ago, there **is** a difference between things of "religion" and things of "faith."

So **what is expected of us** ISN'T church work; the Sunday morning or committee stuff (although that can be part of it.)

Instead, THIS "*wool and mutton*" byproduct is about the work of the church, which is much larger and a whole lot more interesting. Amen?

But, THOSE BYPRODUCTS have costs; sometimes a lot of cost.

At the same time, we have to remember that the work and "other byproducts" also means that each and every one of the sheep has purpose and value; each one of the MOB, the flock, the FAMILY OF FAITH is important.

Every one of us can contribute; in fact we're called to contribute, in one way, SOME WAY, to the mission of the church.

WE can't claim to be too young or too old;

too new at this “faith thing,”
too ordinary or uneducated,
too ornery, or busy, or TOO ANYTHING to avoid the wool and the mutton.

We are needed; and without us, without any single one of us, the mission and work of the Lord and his church are impoverished; can’t “go to market.”

We matter, and things are expected of us.

We weren’t created for our Master’s amusement – although God probably DOES chuckle and shake His head over us often – WE are valuable to God’s Kingdom Work!

Jesus is the Good Shepherd we desperately need. He laid his life down for us. Jesus is the Good Shepherd that talks about his *relationship* with his flock. Frankly, that “knowing” should be 2-way of *knowing our* Shepherd as much as our Shepherd knows us!

‘Cause HE DOES KNOW us; personally. He knows our hearts and our minds and STILL LOVES US!

One of the truths of these verses about the Good Shepherd is that, too often, we forget is that there’s no such thing as being chosen for privilege.

We are not chosen or protected by our Good Shepherd for the sake of our comfort, convenience, or needs.

No one in the Bible is chosen for that!

Here we are, just a few weeks since the celebration of the Resurrection and we continue to remember that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, *willingly laid down his life for his sheep...* that was fulfilled on the cross.

See, God’s care and protection are given because God thinks we’re worth it; and that God’s LOVE will better equip us for service; the “wool” if you will.

And the HOPE of the Resurrection that we live AND PROCLAIM is that yes, Jesus did lay down his life, BUT HE ALSO TAKES IT UP AGAIN. Praise the Lord!

He DOES lead; (he herds) us with God-given authority, but it is about because of grace and love and peace. Jesus didn't ever reign because he lords it over people. He reigns in service; and we should too.

That means that something special, something more, is expected of us.

To be sure, Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

He paid the price.

And he protects us and cares for us because we ARE valuable, and important; and have an essential role to play in all of this.

And that, Dear MOB, is the business of wool and mutton.

May this Eastertide season be all that we need it to be.

Praise be to God.

Amen!