

3) Connected to the Shepherd

John 10:11-18 • 2021-04-25 • Easter Series: Connected



In the recent movie, “The One and Only Ivan,” a gorilla is raised by a man who runs an amusement center for tourists. At first it seems like the man has some fairly good intentions. He spends time with the baby gorilla and takes it everywhere. He loves the gorilla so much that he chooses it over his own family. He takes the gorilla to the drive-in movies and lets it live in his home as he cares for it. But somewhere along the way reality sinks in. Raising a gorilla isn’t easy at all. The cost of a gorilla becomes evident and the needs for its care are exhausting. The man eventually is forced to place the gorilla in a small, confined enclosure. He puts him on display. The gorilla is called upon to be part of a tourist attraction that helps pay the bills. It is confused and frustrated, feeling somewhat betrayed. It is as if the man still cares for him but doesn’t do what is best for him. I’m sure it is altered a lot from the true story, but it is based on true events in which a silverback became the center of attention because of the lack of care from its owner. But should it surprise us that there are caretakers who don’t really care as much as they ought? Some people are horrified that people will keep their fish in tiny bowls and make them live in filthy, undersized containers until they die a slow miserable death. And it’s not just fish. Every area of society shows evidence that humans don’t always make the best caretakers of what is entrusted to them. Might it ever feel like this with God? Do you ever feel like God has your best interest in mind but loses his way and treats you like that gorilla locked in an enclosure? Or do you suppose it might seem at times like God treats life with too little value as he places it in a tiny, dirty bowl while it slowly is left to die? Far from it! God not only is a good caretaker of his Creation, but he is the only one we can trust to always do what is good. We are connected to him as his flock and know that he is a good Shepherd. We continue our series for the Easter season looking at how we are connected. And we see today why you can be sure that you have a Shepherd who will never fail to care for you.

It seems that no matter where you turn people entrusted to care for other people will fail. It happens on every level. There are many good parents, but what does it say about parenthood when so many are deemed unable, unfit, or uninterested in parenting. Around 400,000 children are in foster care in our country. Sure, some of them might not have parents. And I’m sure a number of their parents do still want to have them in their home but for whatever reason -just or unjust- they cannot. But you can be sure there are many parents who simply have no concern for their children’s well-being. Some parents would rather murder them in the womb than raise them. And you can say the same for every part of society. Babysitters, dog-sitters, foster parents, medical staff all have been caught abusing those entrusted to their care. There are many good teachers. But some will abuse their students. Who can you trust? And you’ll no doubt find many more good things than bad things done by law enforcement. But why do we continue to encounter reports and videos of injustice by some? Like parents and teachers, they are a helpful part of what cares for society. But still some abuse their power. Careless abuse of power extends even to the highest levels of authority. Even those who serve as spiritual leaders are not free from failure to watch out for those entrusted to their care. Reports of abuse, corruption, and constant false teachings abound in churches.

Jesus saw the lack of care by leaders in his time. The crowds following him were left helpless and without good leaders. And his heart broke at seeing the sight. He considered them to be like sheep without a shepherd. It’s not that there weren’t people entrusted with the spiritual care of ancient Israel. The people in Jesus’ time had many spiritual leaders. Over the nation was the Sanhedrin. Their job as they interacted with Roman authorities was to preserve the people’s religious way of life. The priests taught the people. Rabbis instructed the young. Scribes and teachers of the law copied and distributed the holy Scriptures. Groups like the Pharisees pushed for religious agendas. Synagogue rulers organized gatherings. There were many serving as spiritual leaders.

But Jesus saw leaders who were mostly serving themselves. And they failed to serve those under their care. The people were used by them to maintain their positions of power. They failed to teach the people and feed them the Word of God. They only shared the Word of God if they could use it to their own advantage. And they created bars and walls with their own traditions so that they could toss the people into tiny fishbowls. Those they served slowly suffered, confined by the law and man-made additions to the law. And those who might have thought they were free were actually kept captive to sin, living a lie while they slowly died in their cage.

Why did the spiritual leaders treat the people so badly? It is because they cared primarily about themselves. They put their own interests, their own happiness, and their own needs above others. Most of the spiritual leaders were more concerned with preserving the status quo and not getting into an argument with Rome than the spiritual well-being of those entrusted to their care. The group called the Pharisees cared a great deal about God’s law. But they didn’t care about the people they tossed to hell by piling up rules and commands for them to keep in order to make themselves fit to be a friend of God. They felt better patting themselves on the back and tossing heavy burdens on the backs of others. They didn’t feed the flock the gospel. They fed it chaff and worthless self-righteous teachings.

They people had bad Shepherds. But they also had Jesus. When all others might fail to care and fail to help the flock, he would not. Jesus began to contrast himself with the many spiritual leaders around him. *“I am the Good Shepherd.*

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” What makes him such a good leader for his flock is his selfless giving. We can easily enough picture a bodyguard or soldier, or police officer who lays down their life to protect those they serve. It does happen on occasion. But can you picture a president taking the bullet for his bodyguard? Can you picture an admiral dying to save his first-year lieutenant? Or what about a mayor going out of the way to die to save a police officer? Jesus is the Shepherd, but he dies for the sheep. He is the Creator, the holy Son of God. But he says he lays down his life for his creation, condemned sinners who go astray. He laid down his life on the cross to shatter the sin and death that encaged us and set us free from the curse of the law. We were lost in sin and captive to the grave and hell, but he set us free by his suffering and death. That is the kind of care you have from him. He is your good shepherd, and you can consider him good because he cares that much for you. If you ever have wondered if your God cares for you, look no further than Jesus the one who died for you. He does care. He is indeed good to you!

Jesus stood in strong contrast to so many spiritual leaders in ancient Israel. Our Good Shepherd still stands in contrast to so many spiritual leaders today too. *“The hired man, who is not a shepherd, does not own the sheep. He sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. Because he works for money, he does not care about the sheep.”* There is always a temptation for anyone shepherding God’s flock to weigh things by money. What does a good shepherd choose, funds or faithfulness? “Do I confront this false teaching and it’s danger for the flock, or do I ignore it since the person advocating the false teaching is probably a big financial contributor to the church?” And sometimes the work is so hard that the urge to give up or flee is real too. “Do I stay and combat this false doctrine, or do I take a call to serve elsewhere?” The good shepherd wouldn’t run from the call to protect his flock. “Do I take the call that offers more money, or do I take the one which I know I can best serve others and advance God’s church?”

God help us to not fall into this awful pit! A shepherd who only serves for personal gain will not be there for his flock when they need him the most. It’s a sad reality seen often in the cry of the prophets: the priests and rulers and judges were all distorting justice and getting fat off the people they served. The Christian church that doesn’t want to stare death in the face and proclaim the gospel, that doesn’t want to combat spiritual forces of evil and help the lowly who suffer under Satan’s grip –this church has strayed from the heart of the Good Shepherd and has become a mere hired hand. It doesn’t view the sheep as bought with the blood of Christ so much as wallets to fund its programs. When we view things in the terms of finances and money, we enter the world’s mercenary view.

But when we view things in terms of the Good Shepherd, Jesus’ puts before our eyes his glorious kingdom of grace. We know the love of our Good Shepherd. We know what he has done for us. That is what motivates a good shepherd to care for the precious flock entrusted to his care. We read earlier what the apostle Paul told the spiritual leaders in Ephesus, *“Always keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock in which the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.”* (Acts 20:28)

We are connected to our Good Shepherd because we know him. *“I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* We have heard about his great love for his flock from the Scriptures. We know of his care for us. No matter how bad things get we know he will not abandon us. And he knows us! Each one of us is precious to him because he shed his blood for us. My daughter has some fish that she works very hard to care for. They recently had offspring and the little fish are completely adored by her. She brings in all her friend to show them off and takes more pictures of them than some might of their own children. And even though they are so tiny that you can barely see them she knows each one. How much more doesn’t our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us care for us and intimately know each one of us!

His plan is to take all his flock and bring them safely under his care. Instead of being devoured by wolves they will be fed his gospel. *“There are other sheep. I must bring them also. There will be one flock and one Shepherd.”*

We live in a very cynical world. The motives of everyone are called into question. It is assumed that if you do anything it can’t really be for a noble purpose. God’s church is also placed under this spotlight. “Why would a pastor work long hours and deal with so many interpersonal issues in people’s lives? Why would he other than to get paid and get attention and feel important. He couldn’t really care or have genuine interest in helping people.” The faithful pastor does. Because he knows a man who laid down his life to help him. This man was the True Son of God, the Good Shepherd. That is why there are any faithful shepherds under him. They know his love. They carry out Peter’s instructions which we read earlier this morning, *“Shepherd God’s flock that is among you, serving as overseers, not grudgingly but willingly, as God desires, not because you are greedy for money but because you are eager to do it.”* (1 Peter 5) And yes, at times they may fail. Some might altogether abandon their role and take advantage of the flock. And at times even the most faithful Shepherd will fail to perfectly carry out their care. But not the Good Shepherd. He will never fail us. Stay connected to him. Pray that faithful Shepherds will always lead the flock to him and his gospel.

Does God have our best interest in mind? Absolutely. He laid down his life to give us freedom and eternal life. He lives to Shepherd us today and forever. Our connection to him will never end. Picture your connection to the Shepherd which will never fail you. *“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. ... For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd.”* (Revelation 7)