

“Sheep Ain’t Cheap”  
Rev. Susan M. Prichard  
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John 10: 11-18

This is one of the favorite images of Jesus—the Good Shepherd. Listen as Jesus explains the role of a shepherd to his disciples and hear God’s word to us in this passage.  
John 10: 11-18

I took the title for today’s message from commentator Ralph Milton. He says: Sheep ain’t cheap.

In this lesson of the good shepherd we hear Jesus telling the disciples what was required of a good shepherd and what was going to be required of him as the shepherd of God’s people. This is one of our most beloved images of Jesus. I think I’ve seen the picture of Jesus with a staff in his hand, amid a flock of sheep in nearly every church I’ve been in. There’s something romantic to us about this pastoral image—especially to those of us far removed from the realities of actual sheep herding. We see the pleasant scene of a countryside dotted with fluffy sheep and frolicking lambs. As Jesus points out, there is a different, harsher reality for the shepherd in ancient Israel.

Jesus tells us that the shepherd puts himself between the flock and danger. A true shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. There’s nothing romantic about that. Out in the wilderness areas where the sheep go to graze, there are many natural predators. Because the grass is so sparse in the wilderness, the flock spreads out and may cover a large area in order to be adequately fed. All throughout this wilderness are caves and wadis where wild animals lie in wait for a sheep to get separated from the flock. When this happens, the sheep becomes a ready victim.

In another passage Jesus tells of the shepherd leaving 99 sheep to go in search of the lost one. That is because the lost one is in real danger of never finding its way back to the herd alive. The good shepherd seeks out the lost.

At night in the wilderness, shepherds try to corral the herd into a canyon or cave where it is easier to protect them. The shepherd then, lies down across the opening of the canyon or cave to keep predators and thieves from stealing one of the sheep.

Without the modern inventions of electric fences and security systems, it was a dangerous life for a shepherd.

All these things would have been known to the people to whom Jesus spoke. So, when he began comparing himself to a good shepherd, they would have known the dangers of which he spoke. Jesus, the good shepherd laid down his life for his followers—his sheep.

In Jesus’ last encounter with the disciples in the Gospel of John (21:9-19), Jesus is on the beach with the disciples eating fish they had just caught. Jesus asks Peter: “Do you

love me?' To which Peter answers, "Yes Lord, you know that I love you." Jesus says, "Feed my sheep. This happens three times. The same number of times that Peter had denied knowing Jesus.

How do we feed Jesus' sheep? I ask this question as we need to keep making decisions about how we spend our money. With fears about recession and pandemics filling our newscasts and conversations, how do we continue to feed Jesus' sheep? The cost of continuing Jesus' ministry today is expensive. It costs time and money to maintain and staff this facility. It costs time and money to educate our children, care for our shut-ins and provide worship and programs for the community. It costs money to feed, cloth and house the needy and to spread the gospel to people in far off lands. But Jesus told us that there were others, in other flocks, as well. Following his example and the standards he set for his disciples, we are responsible for the one, every bit as much as the 99.

Sheep ain't cheap. Maintaining Jesus' flock and bringing others into it takes our time, our talent and our treasure. It takes a real commitment on our part. But compared to the commitment of Jesus, and the saints and martyrs of the church, what is asked of us is minimal.

When asked his opinion of tithing, evangelist Tony Campolo launched into his rendition of an old favorite hymn. Instead of the real words, he sang: "one tenth to Jesus, one tenth to Jesus". The real words we know are "my all to Jesus, my all to Jesus". He did this to show how trivial he thought the question. For him, true discipleship didn't involve quibbling about the amount of money people pledge, it was more concerned with the commitment to Jesus and his ministry. If we are committed to Jesus, we give what we can because we cannot help but want to do our best for him.

Jesus, the good shepherd, willingly gave his all for us, what are we willing to give in return?

This morning, as we gather about the table of our Lord, let us be open to Jesus coming anew into our lives. Let's think about the joy we get when we do good for others in His name. Let's remember the willingness of those early Christians to share all that they had so that no one went without. Let's think of ways to feed Jesus' sheep.

Thanks be to God. Amen.