

We Follow
The United Church of Broomfield
April 25, 2021

John 10:11-18 (CEB)

¹¹ “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That’s because he isn’t the shepherd; the sheep aren’t really his. So the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ He’s only a hired hand and the sheep don’t matter to him.

¹⁴ “I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that don’t belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.

¹⁷ “This is why the Father loves me: I give up my life so that I can take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I give it up because I want to. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it up again. I received this commandment from my Father.”

Have you ever noticed an infant turn its head instinctively toward the sound of its mother’s voice? When I first met little Elsie Anne, who we baptized on Easter, I was holding her, and she began to cry. I rocked her, talked to her, but she still cried. But as soon as Katie talked with her, she calmed. She didn’t stop crying completely, but it was evident that she was soothed by the sound of Katie’s voice. She knew that her Mom, her protector, her comforter was nearby.

Have you had the experience of being able to tell by the look on your child’s face that he or she is not feeling well? Parents can so often just tell.

Has a close friend ever said to you, “I can tell by your expression that something is wrong”?

We know some people on a superficial level — by name, face or reputation. We know other people — family members and close friends, for example — on a deeper level. We know their stories and they know ours. We grasp the meaning behind each other’s facial expressions. We can finish each other’s sentences.

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

Jesus is our “good shepherd.” Jesus knows us, and we belong to him.

This past Thursday was Earth Day. A day dedicated to appreciating God’s creation, hopefully. So, have you ever spent time reflecting on God’s creation?

Have you stood on the shore of the ocean and gazed at water that extends as far as the eye can see? Have you ever taken delight in the brilliant colors splashed across the sky at sunset? Have you watched a delicate

butterfly gather nectar from a flower outside your kitchen window? Have you looked into the big, bright eyes of a young baby?

Our God is the God of everything - the entire universe, and at the same time, our God is mindful of each one of us.

The book of Psalms contains 150 songs and poems composed by the people of Israel. These songs and poems express the thoughts, fears, beliefs and hopes of a people who lived a very long time ago, in a world very different from ours today. Yet, we find in these ancient songs and poems words that express *our* feelings and *our* experiences.

One psalmist asked a question that we ourselves might ask. He exclaimed, "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"¹

God cares for all creation, which includes every person. Not only does God care for each one of us, but God *knows* us — really *knows* us. Another psalmist declared, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely. ... For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb."²

God created us. God formed us. The creation story in the book of Genesis tells us "the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."³ We can imagine divine hands carefully shaping the human from the dust and then bringing him close and breathing in the divine breath. The act of creation was the first step in the story of God's relationship with Her people. God drew us closer in relationship with the gift of Her Son, Jesus. The Gospel of John tells us that God "became flesh and lived among us."⁴ God came to us as a human being, Jesus, and experienced life on earth as we do.

Jesus said, "I know my own," and we can be assured that Jesus really does know us. Jesus knows firsthand what it is like to experience temptation. He knows what it is like to lose someone close and feel grief and sorrow. He knows what it is like to be rejected, even hated, by other people. At the same time, Jesus truly understands what it is like to feel joy, happiness, and love.

In this scripture passage from John's gospel, we see that the relationship of "knowing" goes a step further. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own *and my own know me.*" Not only does Jesus, the Son of God, know us — we also know Jesus.

How are we able to really know Jesus, a man who lived so long ago, a man who is also, at the same time, one with God?

One way we know Jesus is through the Holy Scriptures. The Old Testament contains prophecies of his coming. The New Testament contains stories of his birth, life, death, and resurrection. The New Testament also contains Jesus' sermons, parables, and instructions about being a disciple. We see in Jesus the example of what it means to live faithfully and honor God. We come to know Jesus when we spend time reading and studying the Bible.

We also grow to know Jesus when we share conversation with others, when we gather to worship with our faith community and when we spend time in prayer.

Jesus called himself “the good shepherd.” The people in Jesus’ day were well acquainted with the life of shepherds and the habits of sheep. Shepherds spent their days out in the fields with their flocks. In the evenings, they often returned to their villages and led their flocks into a common sheep pen for the night. The flocks intermingled in the pen, and for the most part, sheep look alike. Yet, in the morning, each shepherd had only to call his flock. The sheep knew the sound of their shepherd’s voice. The flocks separated, and each flock followed its own shepherd.

There was a story of a farmer and an expert sheep breeder. He was helping some kids at his local county fair once and while he was there, someone went to his farm, went into his barn and stole his sheep. The farmer thought to himself, “who could that have been?” He had a suspicion of who it was, a person from a different county and it just so happened that that county’s fair was two weeks later. So, he and a friend went to the other county fair and went into the sheep barn and his sheep were crying for him. He recognized that they'd been retagged. His friend said to him, “oh come on, are you going to tell me that you can recognize your sheep from their cries?” The farmer said, “Absolutely. I know my sheep.”

When we think about the claim that what might look to us as indistinguishable creatures from each other, we may not be able to tell the difference between some people, God knows us that well. Out of the billions of people on this planet, God knows everyone individually. I know my own sheep and they know me. And we can hear Her voice above all the other noise in the world. We listen and we follow.

Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel to send a Savior. Yet, God’s plan for salvation includes all creation, not just the nation of Israel. One of the most familiar verses in the Bible is John 3:16, which begins “For God so loved the world...” God so loved the *world* — the *whole* world. God wants salvation for ALL of creation, not just the nation of Israel.

In our passage, Jesus said, “I have other sheep that don’t belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd.” Jesus again identified himself as the good shepherd when he addressed Peter after the resurrection, saying, “Feed my lambs. ... Tend my sheep.”⁵

We are called to continue the work of feeding Jesus’ lambs, tending Jesus’ sheep and bringing others into the fold. We are called to love as God and Jesus did – an unconditionally love for all. We must remember that love isn’t simply an emotion, as we so often make it. Love is much more than feelings, love is action. Love is what a shepherd does.

When we offer food, clothing and hospitality, we are showing by example, the love of God.
When we love so deeply that we’re willing to sacrifice for others, we love God and Jesus did.

In this scripture passage Jesus compares the shepherd with a hired hand. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. When the hired hand sees the wolf coming, he leaves the sheep and runs away. That’s because he isn’t the shepherd; the sheep aren’t really his. So, the wolf attacks the sheep and scatters them. He’s only a hired hand and the sheep don’t matter to him.” We live with confidence that Jesus, God incarnate, will not run away from us. When hardship comes, God will remain with us and watch over us.

Considering this week's verdicts in Minnesota, love in action is remembering that despite the guilty verdicts, George Floyd is still dead...and he shouldn't be. If we are going to be one flock, following one voice, honoring one universal love, then the guilty verdicts are only a grain of sand on all the world's beaches. Much more shepherding needs to be done. In the last three weeks, Adam Toledo (13), Daunte Wright (20) and Ma'Khia Bryant (15) were killed by police officers – and they shouldn't have been. If we truly hear the voice of the good shepherd, then their deaths can't be ignored, forgotten or dismissed. They demand that WE be good shepherds and not hired hands.

As followers of Jesus, we know we are not alone. We know that God, Jesus and Spirit is always with us through all the hardships and challenges we face. Jesus is the good shepherd. He knows us and we know him, and we follow.

AMEN

¹ Psalm 8:3-4.

² Psalm 139:1-4, 13.

³ Genesis 2:7.

⁴ John 1:14.

⁵ John 21:15-16.