



## The Good Shepherd

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

### John 10:14-16

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own knows me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.

**H**ow would you like it if I put you on the spot right now? How would you like it if I were to ask you to stand up right now, right here in front of all these people, and answer a really tough theological question? Are you game?

I won't do that. I won't put you on the spot in public. I won't ask you to stand up in front of anyone or say anything. But, I want you to answer the question for yourself.

It's a tough one. It's an important one. Here it is:

Who is Jesus?

That's it. It doesn't sound so tough. It doesn't seem to be threatening. I bet you can answer it easily.

Who is Jesus?

How would you answer that little question?

- Who is this Jesus you claim to follow?
- Who is this Jesus you say you believe in?
- Who is this Jesus you profess to love?

If I didn't know anything at all about Jesus, what would you tell me about him? What words would you use to help me understand what you believe about Jesus in your heart?

Who is Jesus?

It's interesting, because he was one of the first people to ask that question. Out on the road one day, he asked his disciples, "*Who do men say that I am?*" [Mark 8:27] He wanted to know what people were thinking about him. I suspect he'd like to hear what you've got to say about him.

So, what would you say?

Before you answer that, maybe you'd better hear again some of the things Jesus said about himself.

He painted a whole series of word pictures about himself, describing who he is. In his self-portrait he described himself in different words and in varying circumstances so we could understand more fully who he is.

In the Gospel of John you can read this whole series of statements that Jesus made about himself. If you take the time to study these statements, you'll come away with a pretty good idea about who Jesus is.

Who is Jesus? Let his own words reveal the answer.

Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life.*" [John 6:35] Jesus said he is bread; that explains him, doesn't it? Well, maybe that's not such a good one to start out with. That saying may be too difficult for some people to digest.

Jesus said, "*I am the way.*" [John 14:6] Now that one's easier, isn't it? But his way may be too hard for some people to follow.

Jesus said, "*I am the light of the world.*" [John 8:12] You can see that clearly, can't you? Unfortunately, some people are not bright enough to see what's happening.

Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" [John 11:25] And while that news might get you excited, a theological discussion about what that means will probably put some people to sleep.

Jesus made all these remarkable statements about who he is, and you ought to be smart enough to get it.

What he said seems deceptively easy to understand when you first hear it. You might mistakenly think that you've got the message. But underneath the surface, once you start digging for meaning, you'll uncover a squirming nest of coiled theological questions poised to strike out at you. And when you uncover that mess, you just might want to slither off and forget it all.

But that question remains. Who is Jesus?

I think there's one more statement he made about himself that you can understand, one that is plain and simple, one you can take to heart without being afraid it's going to strike back and bite you. That one is when Jesus said, "*I am the good shepherd.*" [John 10:14]

You like that one, don't you? You're familiar with it. It reminds you of another piece of scripture, a piece of scripture that's familiar, a piece of scripture you really like. You know that piece of scripture. It's the 23rd Psalm, the one that begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."

Maybe you've got it memorized. Maybe you can recite it by heart. Maybe you grew up attending a Sunday School class where they painted that kind of picture of Jesus.

That's the kind of picture I saw of Jesus when I was growing up. In my Sunday School classrooms, there were pictures of Jesus. If anyone had asked me, "Who is Jesus," I would have told him that Jesus is that guy with the long hair, the guy in a dress, holding a little lamb.

The pictures of Jesus I grew up with always showed a kind and gentle Jesus surrounded by a herd of contented fluffy sheep.

"Who is Jesus?" I knew the answer when I was a little boy. Jesus is the good shepherd. That picture of Jesus made me feel comfortable. It made me think that Jesus is nice, that Jesus will take care of me, that Jesus won't threaten me or harm me. It made me think if I ever got lost, Jesus, the good shepherd, would come and find me.

I suspect you're pretty comfortable with that picture of Jesus, too. And because you're comfortable with it, you might make the same mistake I sometimes make. When I get comfortable with something, I start thinking that I know all there is to know about it.

I like to think that I know all the major facts there are to know about the American presidential elections. After all, that's my hobby. I do that for fun. But the other day, someone asked me who Franklin Pierce's vice president was. To my shame, I didn't know. Do you know who he was?

I like to think that I know all about you; after all, you are the sheep of my pasture. You are the members of my flock. I like to think I know everything there is to know about you. But even after twenty years, there are times when I just can't remember your name. Sometimes I think I'm losing it when I can't recall the place where you work. I am red-faced and ashamed when I get your children's names mixed up. And I always try to be real careful when I mention other people around you, because I still have trouble knowing who is related to whom.

There's a lesson in that: just because I'm comfortable doesn't mean I know it all.

Here's the problem, I'm comfortable with the idea that Jesus is the good shepherd. I think I know what being a good shepherd is all about.

The trouble is, I don't know anything about sheep or shepherds. I've never tended a flock of sheep. I've never spent the night out on a hillside trying to keep the wolves away. I've never had to climb through the brambles

and the vines trying to free some stupid ram that went astray. I've never been to a sheep ranch. I never had a little lamb follow me to school. I don't even like to eat lamb stew.

How about you? How familiar are you with shepherding? How many sheep can you count grazing on the front lawns here in North Tonawanda?

I'm comfortable with the idea. I can recite the words from memory, "The Lord is my shepherd..." The whole idea makes me feel good. But, there are some things lacking in my experience. Most of the still waters I find is what collects in the potholes. All the pathways I trod are paved. And the green pastures in my neighborhood have been filled up with houses and new Tops grocery stores..

The truth is, the life I lead is far removed from the life of a shepherd. And while I'm comfortable with the idea of Jesus being a good one, I only have an idealized picture of what it's like to be a shepherd.

But being a child of the New Testament, that's one of the most important pictures Jesus painted of himself. "*I am the good shepherd,*" he said.

If I am going to see that picture clearly, if I am going to understand what Jesus meant when he called himself the good shepherd; there are two steps I'm going to have to take.

If you want to see and understand, you have to take those same two steps.

Step one: if Jesus is the good shepherd and I am going to be his faithful follower, then I have to go out, look for, and find the sheep who are lost. So are you!

Are you ready to do that? That's what Jesus did, and he expects his followers to do the same thing.

When you are one of his sheep, when you are a faithful follower of Jesus, when you are a loyal believer, you are counted among the ninety-nine sheep out of a hundred who are safe in the fold. You're already here. You're set and secure. You're like that elder brother Jesus talked about in the parable of the prodigal son. You're the one who stayed home. You're the one who did the work. You're the one who is steady and sure, responsible and mature.

My good friend Harry Lowers, back twenty-eight years ago when I first met him, told me that he was a Democrat of the worst kind. What he meant was that he was a strong Democrat. He always voted Democratic. The

leaders of the Democratic party never had to worry about Harry, they knew they always had his vote.

Harry said the problem was, there were also Republicans of the worst kind, those staunchly loyal and dependable voters of the Republican ticket. During this election, neither the Democratic nor the Republican leaders are worried about their most faithful core constituents. They've got their party members, members of the worst kind, all sewed up. So, they spend their time and effort on the people who can be swayed, the soft followers, the undecided voters.

I suspect that Jesus would be very happy if he could count of you to be a Christian of the worst kind, someone who would always vote with Jesus, someone who would always follow his party line, someone who would always endorse his platform.

The trouble is all those other people, all those people who are lost, the ones who stray - they require so much time, so many resources, so much attention. That means Jesus and his faithful followers have to spend a great deal of time and energy trying to find the lost ones.

The bad ones, the ones who wander off, the ones who go astray, the ones who want to go their own way - they're the ones who get all the attention. As a Christian, or a Democrat, or a Republican of the worst kind - it just doesn't seem fair.

There was a young man who was called to be the pastor of a congregation. When he got there, he found out that the count on the vote to call him was 98 to 3. The very idea that three people voted against him was quite upsetting.

The habit in that congregation was to vote on keeping the pastor every year. So, that young minister made it his main purpose to locate the three people who voted against him and to win them over. He was shrewd enough to find out who those three people were, and he showered them with attention.

At the end of his first year, when the congregation voted whether or not to keep the pastor, the vote turned out three in favor and 98 against.

Sometimes the good Christians who regularly sit in the seats every Sunday morning, sometimes they think their shepherd ought to pay more attention to them.

Sometimes it seems that Jesus concentrates too much on the lost, the down-and-out, the lame, the blind, the sick, the poor, the unattractive left-

overs of life, and the sinners. All those good sheep who are safe within the walls of the church cry out for some attention along the way.

But if you accept that Jesus is the good shepherd, you must also accept that he is going to keep on searching out the ones who are lost.

A mother of several children was asked the question: "which one of your children do you love the best?" Without a moment's hesitation, she answered: "I love most the one who is sick, until he is well; and I love most the one who is missing, until she gets home."

Isn't that the way it usually is in your family, too? You show more love to the one who needs it the most, until you meet that need; then, you move on and show more love to another one. You still love everyone equally; you just have to give more attention where it's needed the most.

That's the way it is in the church, too. And so, those of you who are safely within the fold must remember that this church was founded by the Good Shepherd, and he is always going to keep operating that way - because: there is always one little lamb who needs more love somewhere, always one child who is sick, always one who has wandered away and is lost, always one who is hungry, or lonely, or who has given up hope.

The task never ends. There is always a hurt somewhere, always an unmet need, always a tear being shed.

And that same Good Shepherd who goes out searching for those people, who finds them wherever they have wandered, and who unselfishly meets their various needs; that same Good Shepherd calls upon you to do the same thing. If you are to be his faithful follower, you've got to find ways to keep showing compassion for all the lost sheep, even when you sometimes think they get too much attention.

The first step you've got to take to be like Jesus is to be willing to search out the lost sheep. The second step you've got to take may be more difficult. The second step is to admit that you're just one of the sheep, too.

Very few people apply for the job of sheep. Most people want to be assistant shepherds, or gate-keepers at the fold, or wool-inspectors, or herd-counters.

How do you see yourself? Do you see yourself as just another one of Jesus' little lambs? Don't you sometimes think that you're a little more important than that raggedy-looking ewe who's sitting down the row from you?

One of your greatest challenges as you continue being one of Jesus' faithful followers is to recognize just how much you need the Good Shepherd in your life. You've got to realize that

- you need his forgiveness just as much as the spectacular sinner needs forgiveness,
- you need his love just as much as the most desperately lonely soul needs his love,
- you need his understanding just as much as the confused and lost wanderer needs his love.

Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and son who had an argument, and in anger the son ran away from their little village to the city of Madrid. Time passed, and after months of silence, the father made a trip to Madrid, looking for his lost son. After days of searching, he placed an advertisement in the newspaper. "Paco," the advertisement read, "meet me at noon, Tuesday, at the paper's office. All is forgiven. Signed: your Father."

When noon came on Tuesday, the father arrived at the newspaper office to find over 800 young men, all named Paco. Each one had come, hoping it was his father who had come to take him home.

That's why you keep coming back to this particular sheep-fold. You come here because this is the place where forgiveness is offered. This is the doorway to your true home.

We are all just sheep in search of a shepherd. We all have wandered off. Sometimes we find ourselves lost in a valley of dark shadows. Sometimes we don't know how to get back home.

Well, my friends, however great your particular darkness may be, however powerful your sins might have been, however far you may have strayed; there is still good news.

There is one who keeps searching until he finds you.

There is one who plucks you from the brambles which entangle you.

There is one who snatches you back from the brink.

There is one who picks you up in his strong arms and carries you gently home.

Who is Jesus? He is the one who is always your Good Shepherd!