

Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 26, 2015
John 10:11-18
Jesus' Self Portrait as the Good Shepherd
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Dear Friends in Christ,

In the comic strip Luann, Luann and two friends were in an art class. The instructor's assignment was to draw multiple self-portraits. The purpose was to have the students get a sense of their true being from varied perspectives. How does the artist see self?

St. John's gospel includes a gallery of Jesus' self-portraits; I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the true vine; I am the way, the truth and the life. These are the ways our Lord and Savior sees himself.

Jesus added how he sees us in relation to those. Whoever feeds on the bread of life never will hunger again. With the light of the world there is no spiritual darkness. Because he is resurrection and life, whoever believes in him will never die. Branches attached to the vine bear fruit, and so forth.

Today we see **Jesus' Self-Portrait as the Good Shepherd**. We see the perspective Jesus has about himself; then, the perspective Jesus has about us his flock.

Sheep herding always has been a difficult and honest profession. It still is today. Many of Jesus' ancestors were shepherds at one time or another; Abraham, Isaac, David who became a king. Constantly on the move, ever vigilant for bad weather, wolves and robbers, the good shepherd led and fed, corrected and protected his charges. Why? The good shepherd genuinely loves his sheep.

With that dedicated life prefigured by his fathers, Jesus portrays himself as the Good Shepherd. This fit with prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah who called the coming Messiah, shepherd. In Psalm 23 David, who knew a thing or two about being a shepherd, painted that exact portrait of the coming Savior. Ezekiel, Isaiah and David made initial pencil sketches, rough drawings. Jesus fleshed out the picture as he painted the complete self-portrait during his ministry.

Jesus led and fed the sheep during his ministry with the Word of God and with miracles. He constantly was on the move. The good shepherd was vigilant against wolves in sheep's clothing like the Pharisees. He corrected and instructed. Jesus did all of this in genuine love for all sinners. He met and loved all people where they were in their lives. At the same time, Jesus called them to repentance of their sins and invited them "Follow me," as his disciples.

It is the great misunderstanding about Jesus that his meeting and loving people where they were in their lives means that he never pointed out their sins or warned them of the eternal consequence of willfully continuing in those sins.

Jesus is a powerful and positive role model for us whom God graciously has called to be "pastors," under-shepherds serving the good shepherd. Yes, we want to meet and love sinners where you are in your lives. That does not mean we, or God, wants you to remain impenitent for sin.

Jesus manifested the outstanding feature of the good shepherd. This feature separated the shepherd who loved the sheep and the hired help who cared first, foremost and only for themselves. The good shepherd was willing to die for his sheep. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I lay down my life for the sheep...The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-only to take it up again."

The hired hand runs away at the first sign of trouble. He would not stay and fight the sheep's enemies. He would run away even as he watched the wolves attack the flock and scatter it. The hired hand only takes care of his interests. Jesus said, "The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep." The good shepherd on the other hand stayed and died if he needed to.

Jesus did not act like a hired hand when it came to our redemption and salvation. We are under attack by spiritual enemies and in fact were doomed to destruction on account of our sins and guilt. Jesus did not run away from Satan in the wilderness but defeated him for our sake. He did not let the people make him a king but remained a lowly servant. Jesus did not agree with Peter that suffering and death should not happen to him.

Jesus had come to bear our sin and suffering and he defeated sin, death and hell. Jesus did not come down from the cross to save himself. He willingly remained on the cross to save the world.

Isaiah is right, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." [Is 53:6]. St. Peter is right, "For 'you were like sheep going astray' but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." [1 Pet 2:25].

Jesus' self-portrait as our good shepherd also paints his perspective about us his flock. What a privilege to be counted among the sheep in the flock of the good shepherd. What a safe place to be.

Jesus' sheep are believers from Israel and from his "other sheep," Gentiles. This is the holy, Christian Church, the communion of saints. Jesus' perspective sees him speaking to us and he sees us listening to his voice. This does not mean just the sound of his voice and then we can go off and eat bad grass, and drink polluted water, and buddy up with wolves. We recognize his voice. We hear it in the sense of taking his words to heart and following him to the sweetest grass, to the living water and to the safety of his arms against the predators of false teachers, and arrogant open rebels against his holy will.

You may know that sheep are not counted among the intellectuals of the animal kingdom. On the contrary they are humble, glad followers of their good shepherd's voice. However, it is a mistake to characterize a bunch of sheep as blindly following their shepherd. They follow him because they know him, trust him, and rely on him even to die for them.

Our Savior does not compare us to swine who like to roll in the mud. He warns us not to be like the horse or the mule, driven and pulled because of stubbornness. He does not picture us as vipers whose mouths are filled with poisonous venom. Jesus portrays us as sheep with the uncanny knack of distinguishing our good shepherd's voice from all others. We know he will lead us where we are best off.

We hear Jesus' voice in God's Word that keeps us connected to him and to his life saving sacrifice on our behalf. We follow him as He calls into the flock. His Father in heaven commanded him to be our Savior and he listened to his Father's voice. Jesus willingly and completely followed his Father's will. Because of the Father's love for the Son the Father loves each and every one of us. Jesus my good shepherd guides me, knows my needs and well supplies me, loves me every day the same, even calls me by my name.

Jesus' perspective of us is that he speaks and we listen, he leads and we follow. He is the good shepherd who laid down his life for us and did not flee. Therefore, we follow his bloody hands and feet that lead us and pay close attention to his voice that soothes us. Amen. <SDG>