

April 21:2024  
John 10:11-18

Easter 4  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## “Do You Know Me?”

“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.”

*Do you know me?*

In the 1970s, American Express began running a series of television commercials featuring celebrities who might be known for their work in movies, television, or music but who might not be recognized out of context in a store or restaurant. The commercials started with Karl Malden, an actor known for his memorable characters but who was often not recognized out of costume. Subsequent commercials featured author Stephen King and musicians Luciano Pavarotti and Roger Daltrey. The message was always the same: while by themselves they might not be known, with the American Express card they were recognized as an important person and awarded the respect they deserved. The commercials all ended with the audience being encouraged to “*don’t leave home without it.*”

Being recognized for who we are is important not only for famous people but for all persons who need to know that they are recognized as persons of worth, who know that there is a place where “*everybody knows your name,*” who have a place where we can go that is truly our home, where we are loved and welcomed always. While it is important to be identified as the persons we claim to be (the reason why facial recognition software has become so prevalent), it is far more important to be known to others as a person with whom we are in a relationship built on love, trust, and caring for each other. To “know” someone means more than being known by the identification we carry; it means being in a relationship with another person who values us and places us at the center of their lives.

In the Bible, to “know” a person means more than mere knowledge of another person’s existence or identity; it means being in a relationship with that person. It is especially at the heart of Jesus’ teaching where he proclaims that “*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me*” (John 10:14). The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of the most beloved images of our Lord in all the Gospels; there are countless depictions of him in art and stained glass (including a painting of the Good Shepherd in our sanctuary and in the large stained-glass

window in our chapel). Churches, schools, and hospitals are named after the Good Shepherd, one of the several “I am” statements in John’s Gospel in which Jesus uses familiar imagery to teach his followers about who he is and his relationship with them:

- “I am the living bread that came down from heaven.” – John 6:51.
- “I am the light of the world.” – 9:5.
- “I am the resurrection and the life.” – 11:25
- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” – 14:6.

Shepherd imagery plays a prominent role in all of Scripture, employing a well-known image of a shepherd leading their flock to good grazing land, watching over them, and protecting them from predators. In time, “shepherd” was a title given to the kings of Israel, those entrusted with the responsibility of watching over the sheep that are God’s people. But because most of the kings of Israel and Judah were incompetent, corrupt, or uncaring for the sheep that the Lord had entrusted to them, the word “shepherd” had gained a bad reputation and became synonymous with a mercenary who cared only for themselves and would abandon the sheep at the first sign of trouble. This reputation is reflected in Jesus’ statement in which he contrasts himself with *“the hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”* (10:12). The failures of the shepherd/kings of Israel had become so prevalent that God sends the prophet Ezekiel to proclaim a word of judgment against them and then to announce to the people that the Lord God will now take charge in leading them as a good and faithful shepherd:

- “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among the scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.” – Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15.

It is this teaching that the Lord God of Israel will be the good and faithful shepherd of the flock that are God’s people that is at the heart of the most familiar and beloved of the Psalm, a statement of faith that *“the LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.”* (Psalm 23:1). The trust that God’s people place in the Lord as our true shepherd is rooted in the relationship that God has established with us, a relationship in which God is present with God’s people, in which God protects and feeds his flock, a

relationship in which God knows each of them and promises that “*even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil – for you are with me*” (23:4). When we proclaim that “*the LORD is my shepherd,*” we are also proclaiming that we will no longer put our trust in any other shepherd who seeks out allegiance and loyalty; as the First Commandment instructs God’s people that they are to have “*no other gods before me*” (Exodus 20:2), when we place our trust in the Lord as our shepherd we are confessing our faith in the one who calls us by name, abides with us always, leads us through all the dangers and challenges of life, and promises us that as “*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*” (23:6).

- “As little as a natural sheep can help itself in even the slightest degree but must depend on its shepherd for all benefits, just so little – and much less – can a man govern himself and find comfort, help, and counsel in himself in all things that pertain to his salvation. He must depend on God, his Shepherd, for all of that. And God is a thousand times more willing and ready to do everything that is to be done for His sheep than is any faithful human shepherd.” – Martin Luther.

Jesus builds on this tradition of the Lord as the good and faithful shepherd in contrast with the people’s experience of wicked, incompetent human shepherds when he proclaims that “*I am the **good** shepherd.*” The adjective “good” (*kalos*) can also mean “model” or “true.” The reference point for what constitutes a model shepherd is set by the image of God in Ezekiel; God the Good Shepherd cares for the sheep, rescuing them from the places to which they have been scattered, fleeing them and tending to the weak, the injured, and the lost. By identifying himself as the Good Shepherd of Ezekiel, Jesus thus identifies himself as fulfilling God’s promise and doing God’s work:

- “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.” – 4:34.
- “Glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do.” – 17:4.

Jesus pushes beyond Ezekiel’s imagery in his reference to the good shepherd’s willingness to lay down his life for the sheep. This reference can be found throughout John’s writings, an allusion to Jesus’ own death (“*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.*” – 15:13). As Ezekiel’s words contrasted the Good Shepherd who is the Lord with the wicked human shepherds who were not faithful in caring for the sheep of God’s pasture, so does Jesus the Good Shepherd contrast himself with “*the hired hand, who is not the shepherd and*

*does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.*” (10:12-13). The image of the hired hand has many echoes of the image of the bad shepherd in the Old Testament (“*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the LORD ... It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD.*” – Jeremiah 23:1-3). The common denominator in all these depictions of the bad shepherd in the Old Testament is this shepherd’s primary concern for their own well-being. As a result, the flock is scattered and devoured by animals because of the bad shepherd’s neglect. The relationship of the hired and to the flock is that of a mercenary who cares only for their own gain. By contrast, the Good Shepherd is selfless and courageous because he “*lays down his life for the sheep*” (10:11). His gift of his life on the cross is a perfect act of love, the perfect example of his teaching that laying down one’s life for another is the greatest expression of God’s love. “*Jesus makes a free, voluntary gift of his life on the cross, through which his sheep came to receive life in abundance.*” (Curtis Martin and William Wright).

Jesus’ second identification of himself as the Good Shepherd is pronounced in reference to his ministry and relationship to God and to his sheep: “*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.*” (10:14-15a). To “know” (*ginasko*) is a category of relationship; the true measure and model of knowledge is God’s and Jesus’ mutual knowledge; “*Jesus is thus the good shepherd not simply because of his relationship to the sheep, but also because of his relationship to God.*” (Gail O’Day). The loving knowledge that forms the basis of the relationship between the Good Shepherd and the sheep is one in which each sheep is so precious that not even one would be seen as expendable, as Jesus teaches in his parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke:

- “Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one who is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” – Luke 15:3-7.

The Good Shepherd’s love for his sheep is both specific and universal; not only does he care for each of the sheep he knows and loves, but he cares for all sheep including those who are not currently in his flock: “*I have other sheep that do not belong to*

*this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*” (10:16). Jesus’ flock is not limited to the sheep of Israel; the community created by his death and resurrection will include people from all nations (“*And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.*” – 12:32). The mark of this expanded flock will be that “*they will listen to my voice.*” To hear Jesus’ voice and to follow him is the mark of faithfulness to Jesus and his word (“*Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.*” – 5:24). Jesus’ proclamation that “*there will be one flock, one shepherd*” again recalls the vision of Ezekiel of a united flock under the Lord as their Good Shepherd: “*You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, says he Lord God.*” (Ezekiel 34:31). Once again, Jesus positions himself as the fulfillment of promises traditionally associated with God; “*Jesus the good shepherd will bring about unity in the flock through his relationship with God and his death.*” (O’Day). The end result will be the unity of believers gathered together with Jesus the shepherd and with one another.

Having identified one of the qualities of a good shepherd as one who is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, Jesus now speaks directly about his death and relationship with God. The sign of Jesus’ love for his people is that he is willing to lay down his life for them as a sign of the fact that “*having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.*” (13:1). Jesus thus obeys the same commandment from God that he passes on to his disciples, that they are to “*love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*” (13:34). Jesus’ laying down his life is an act he freely chooses as an expression of his love and obedience to God:

- “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.” – 10:17-18.

Since Jesus has the power of God, he has the power to overcome his own death in the resurrection. By laying down his life and rising from the dead, Jesus obediently fulfills the Father’s command and reveals to the world the love of God who “*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*” (3:16). Jesus’ enactment of God’s work will be incomplete until he returns to the Father through his resurrection and ascension, when as God’s Son he may “*give eternal life to all whom you have given him.*” (17:2).

- “Jesus is more than the good shepherd for whom Israel waits, because he is also the gate for the sheep. Jesus is the way of life, and he leads the way to life. While these are closely related, they are not the same thing. Jesus is the way to life because he lays down his own life. These are non-transferrable attributes; they derive from the heart of Jesus’ identity as the one sent by God.” – O’Day.

It is not by accident that the image of the Good Shepherd is a beloved one in our Christian faith, because it reminds us of the relationship that God establishes with us as “*his people, the sheep of his pasture*” (Psalm 100:3). God is not a cold, distant being who cares little for his creation or his people; we believe that not only did God create the heavens and the earth but that God continues to abide with his people, providing for them and protecting them “*out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all*” (*Small Catechism*). We believe that God does not look upon his flock as a faceless, nameless horde, but as persons who are known and loved by God, holy and precious in God’s sight. We believe that the Lord is our Good Shepherd who calls his own by name and leads them; they follow because they know his voice.

- “When you call a person by name, that means that you care something for that person as a person. And nothing less than this is a true reflection of the way God looks at people ... every human being is unique and uniquely precious.” – Lesslie Newbigin.

There may be occasions when having an American Express card makes it possible for a person to be recognized as being worthy of credit or entrance to otherwise restricted places. There is a place in our world for proper identification so that we are recognized and known as the persons we truly are. But our relationship with our Good Shepherd is one that requires not cards, passports, or forms of identification; when God looks upon us, our Lord sees the people he loves so dearly that he gave his only Son, so that all who hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow him know that he will continue to lead and guide us so that we may have the *strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*” that comes with our confident faith that as that because Jesus Christ is our Good Shepherd, “*surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD – forever!*”

Amen.