Today is Shepherd Sunday on the church calendar. That doesn’t mean we’re honoring actual shepherds around the world today, as opposed say to plumbers or computer scientists or whatever. It means we are reflecting on texts of Scripture that use the metaphor of shepherd to depict the character of God and Christ.

You probably mouthed along with the inimitable Jenna Worthen earlier as she recited the beloved Twenty-third Psalm from the King James Version. Any other version of it is blasphemy, don’t you know?! The Shepherd Psalm is comforting beyond all others. We read it at memorial services and gravesides. We may even say it when insomnia strikes, because counting on the Good Shepherd is surer to bring good sleep than counting sheep.

In John 10, Jesus makes a bold Psalm 23 move. He identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who cares for the sheep. He will soon make the claim that he and the Father are one. Not one and the same, but one in the same way we speak of lover and beloved.

This brings to mind the painting by Gustav Klimt titled The Kiss. The large work from Klimt’s Golden Period draws on influences from the mosaics in the churches of Ravenna, Italy. It shows a man and woman in full embrace, their clothing like draperies that envelope them. You have to strain to see where one starts and the other leaves off, so united are they in the intimacy they share.

Similarly, Jesus and God are one in heart and mind and purpose as the Son to the Father. What we see in Jesus we can trust is true of the God we cannot see. God is good, and Jesus uses the image of a good shepherd to tell us how that is so.

Now, when we say the word good, we might miss the full sense of it in the Greek word used here, kalos. Kalos means good not just in a moral sense, although that is true too, it means good as true or authentic or beautiful. So how can you tell the difference between a good...
shepherd that can be trusted and a bad one that can’t?

United Methodist pastor Larry Daniel, who is a Civil War buff and even writes novels on the period, tells this story on himself. I will never forget when I got my wife’s engagement ring. I had been saving up money from all of the marriages I had performed to buy an antique musket—an 1864 U. S. Springfield rifle—oh, it was beautiful. Instead, I used the money to buy an engagement ring. ... But after I had bought the ring, I said to the jeweler: ‘Now, be honest with me. The deal is made. I can’t back out of it. Can you really tell the difference between a real one carat ring and some phony thing I can buy off the shopper’s channel on TV?’

The jeweler said, ‘Come around here and look at this, I want to show you something.’ He put the light on two rings. The one I had just bought and a phony diamond. Then he gave me his jeweler’s eyeglass. He said look at this cheap imitation and look at what you just bought. ... I was amazed. My ring sparkled. The counterfeit was dull and had no luster.

Jesus compared two shepherds. Outwardly there seems no difference. The skin of both has been bronzed by the sun and weathered by the wind. They both carry a fleece to keep them warm at night. Both carry a shepherd’s crook. But one is a genuine shepherd and the other a counterfeit. One is a shepherd in his heart; the other is a shepherd for hire.

On an ordinary day you could never tell them apart. But let trouble come. Let a pack of wolves appear and then the difference comes out. The hireling runs because it is only a job to him. He has no ownership. The real shepherd stays.¹

Jesus says, “I lay down my life for my sheep.” That is the difference between the real shepherd and the poser.

Now, I want to make a move here that I think we’re supposed to make—from Jesus to the church, from the Good Shepherd to the Good Shepherd Church. How do you tell the difference between a church that is truly

¹ From a sermon by Brett Blair, The Good Shepherd

https://www.sermons.com/sermon/the-good-shepherd/1350184
animated by the Good Shepherd and one that only looks like it on the outside because the sign on the building says church?

These days the church is in the news all the time and mostly not for looking like a Good Shepherd Church. Young people are leaving the church at a rate never seen in our lifetime. And the reason given time and again is authenticity. When they look at us, they don’t see the Good Shepherd in us.

I want to give three ways Jesus lays out to describe what it takes for us to be a truly authentic church, a good church, a beautiful church to which people would be drawn.

First, like Jesus who gave his life for the world, the church has to lay down its life for those who are threatened and vulnerable to the wolves of the world. The Good Shepherd Church lays down its life for the sheep.

We have just received the guilty verdicts in the Derek Chauvin trial for his reckless killing of a Black man named George Floyd. The duty of police is to protect and serve. Chauvin failed in his duty. But the bigger cultural story is the legacy of brutality in this country against Black Americans. The painful history of the white church in America is that time and again it has been on the side of the wolves instead of the sheep. We have defended the oppressors instead of the oppressed.

From the time of chattel slavery, the white church has promoted the idolatrous system of white supremacy, making a phony biblical case for slavery. After the Civil War, instead of repenting of our wicked ways, we defended segregation, further demeaning the dignity of Black Americans. I am sorry to say that was true for a time here at Wilshire, too. Today, the white church’s silence on racial injustice is heard loud and clear.

In this way, we are more like the hireling Jesus talks about that is more concerned with his own welfare than the sheep who need protecting. We are all too often worried that if we take a stand, it will offend people in the church and cause dissension. But a Good Shepherd Church can only be good if it lays down its life for the sheep.

Second, a Good Shepherd Church knows the sheep by name.

There’s a story of a census taker
who went to a poor, mountain family to gather information. He asked the mother how many dependents she had. She began, \textit{Well, there’s Rosalie and Billy, and Lewella, and our dog, Willie.} The census taker interrupted her and said: \textit{No ma’am that’s not necessary. I just need humans.}

\textit{Oh, she said. Well, there’s Rosalie and Billy and Lewella.} Rather exasperated, the census taker interrupted her again and said: \textit{No ma’am, you don’t seem to understand. I don’t need their names; I just need numbers.} The mother innocently replied: \textit{But I don’t know them by numbers. I only know them by names.}\footnote{Ibid.}

A Good Shepherd Church is one where people are known by names, not by number. This past week, we had a memorial service for one of our own, 64-year-old, Jan Cureton, who died of pancreatic cancer. She came to us two and half years ago, because of our stand for full inclusion of LGBTQ Christians. Jan’s daughter is married to a woman, and Jan celebrated being part of a church that would welcome them. But the thing she kept saying at the end is that she felt known here herself. Her pastor knew her by name. She wasn’t a number; she was a person.

A Good Shepherd Church is composed of unique people, all of them sheep who know the Good Shepherd because they know they are known in the church of the Good Shepherd.

Finally, a Good Shepherd Church is always on the lookout for sheep of other folds.

Jesus said that he has sheep of another fold that he must find and bring in so that there will be one flock and one shepherd. Originally, this may have meant Gentiles, like you and me. But it’s the work of the church always to be going to find those who need to know the Good Shepherd. This is our evangelistic purpose.

The history of the church’s mission efforts is that we go to the ends of the earth to find lost sheep and bring them in. Missions historian Andrew Walls says that Christianity has always had a “bias toward the periphery.” We go to the margins of society to find those who have been neglected and forgotten.
Another theologian put it this way: *When congregations look to places of vitality in their own life, they are likely to think first about their ministries at the margins of the church or where members are encountering people who are challengingly different. Often the people who don’t belong to our own fold and hear Jesus’ voice in unfamiliar ways are the ones best able to help us hear it and understand it afresh.*

A Good Shepherd Church lays down its life for others. It knows people as people. And it seeks out those Christ knows and brings them in so that there can be one flock and one shepherd.

These are the marks of a good church that reflects the presence of the Good Shepherd, a church where people can’t see where Christ leaves off and the church begins. This is what we aim for, Wilshire, now and always. Amen.

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