“See What I Just Did?”

John 10:11-18

April 22, 2018

Not sure if all of you know this, but before I headed to seminary, I worked on a pig farm. Before that I was working in a dairy plant that made lactose powder for cake mixes and other uses. I was getting pretty bored at that job and I was reading the newspaper on a break and I see this ad. It was for the manager of a company called Independent Pork Producers. I assumed that it was a slaughterhouse and the position would be some sort of quality managing job, making sure everyone was following health codes and the like. So, I called the number and it turned out that it was a farrowing operation, where piglets are born. The owner invited me on an interview and somehow ended up being the manager of a pig farm. I had no experience with pigs whatsoever. This at least sounded more exciting than what I was doing at the dairy plant.

It took quite awhile to get familiar with how to control pigs. Twice a week, three-week old piglets are sent away from that farm to another one where they eat and grow. It was crazy to watch how to get these piglets out of the barn. You back a trailer up to the loading dock. This is an indoor loading dock. Pigs will not move toward colder air. Then you make sure that every door or gate from the beginning to the end is closed. If any doors are left open then you could have a major problem with piglets sneaking off somewhere. After your route is ready to go, the fun begins. You open the door and start pushing the piglets. With you, you have a board that is (describe the board) like this. You also have this thing that looks like a giant pancake spatula. You push the piglets along and you yell and you yell. Eventually the majority of the pigs move toward the trailer. And off they go to their next farm. It is the funnest and craziest few minutes of the day. It is nothing compared to when you have to move some boars around. These are the male pigs that are on the farm to make sure that the females are in heat. They are strong and much bigger than we are. And they can hurt you. But once you have everything ready to go, just be careful and they will move like the piglets do. As the saying goes in the pork industry, pigs are easy, people are hard. Much easier to take care of the pigs than your co-workers.

You do not want to try and move sheep the way you try to move pigs. It will not go well for you. Sheep would not do well in the relatively loud environment that a pig farm has. Cows and pigs can be pushed with loud yelling and prods. When you try and move a sheep you need to lead. Be calm, be positive. Sheep won’t go anywhere that a trusted leader won’t go. Sheep are highly communal animals and they will not thrive alone. They have been shown to remember up to fifty different faces for up to 2 years. They also look out for others of their flock who are ill or not doing well. These are highly intelligent and communal animals. They will eventually bond well with a shepherd who cares for them. They consider the shepherd part of their family and will follow them anywhere.

Thank you for allowing me to give you a little lesson on caring for livestock. That is what our gospel today speaks to. Livestock, which is a part of many people in Israel’s life. They understand the dynamics of farm animals that many of us no longer do. And of course, they farmed in a much different way than we do today. Jesus begins our scripture today speaking of what he is like. He is the good shepherd. Why good? Good is kind of ambiguous. One person’s definition of good could be much different than another’s. It would be much easier if he just said, “I am the shepherd.” At least another word should have been used. Maybe Excellent, outstanding, or amazing? Good is just too hard to define. The word that is defined as good is kalos. We generally think that good is the opposite of bad. A better definition may be model. I am the model shepherd. The model shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

This passage is interpreted in the light of what happened in chapter nine. I would have liked to read the whole thing to you, but I’ll just give you a quick summary. In chapter nine, Jesus was walking along he saw a man who was blind from birth. His disciples asked Jesus who had sinned, this man or his parents so that he was born blind? This was a common belief of the time that sin was inherited throughout the generations. Jesus responds, that isn’t how it works. He is blind, so that God’s work might be revealed through him. Jesus spits on the ground, makes mud out of it and spreads it on the blind man’s eyes. Gross. Go wash in the pool of Siloam. The blind man did so and he came back able to see. People were naturally curious as to how this man who had always been blind was now able to see. The blind man just says Jesus made mud, put it on my eyes and I washed it off. And now I can see! He doesn’t know who Jesus is or what he does. When he finally sees Jesus, he doesn’t recognize him by sight. Finally when Jesus explains the situation, he believes.

In chapter 10, Jesus is explaining who he is in the light of chapter nine. Saying look what I did with the blind man. This is what it means. I am the model shepherd. The model shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand does not care for the sheep as much as the shepherd does. I am the model shepherd. I know my own and keep my own and my own know me. Just as much as the father knows me and I know the father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. 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.

Well wait just one minute. Wasn’t Jesus crucified by powers beyond his control? The dominating and occupying forces of the Romans? In this passage, he insists that no one takes his life from him. Very important to our remembering of the crucifixion. Rome used crucifixion as public theater to show that there was no limit to their brutality. Crucifixion arose among soldiers with time on their hands. They nailed rats and other small animals to pieces of wood and took bets on how long it would take them to die. One day, a particularly creative person wondered how long it would take a human to die. Of course, nobody volunteered. Attempts to find somebody were met with opposition from family friends and local officials. They needed to find a nobody who had nobody to defend him. That nobody was found and bets were made. This nobody was murdered and the body discarded. That is the thing about being a nobody, in the end you are just a dead body. There is no one to claim you, tell stories about your life, just a broken, tortured body to dispose of.

By the time Jesus was crucified, Rome used crucifixion to make nobodies out of troublemakers who might become somebodies. This was still entertainment, roman soldiers placed bets on whatever they could place bets on. But this whole theater was to show that these troublemakers were nobodies. They were paraded through the streets to demonstrate to any supporters they may have were powerless. They were stripped naked and taunted. Shown that you are truly a nobody. Then the body was left to rot, showing that Rome had the power to take anybody and make them into a rotting nobody.

Nobody takes my life from me, says Jesus. Said the one who was unable to get free from the nails. I have the authority to lay it down and pick it up as well. This would have been a very startling statement to the hearers of John. This is something that Jesus has known about for eternity. When Jesus is in the garden in John 18, he gives himself up. There is no betrayal. No kiss. This is all Jesus’ choice. Hearers would see in their minds the power that the Romans showed after the failed First Jewish revolt. Thousands of Jews were crucified. Thousands were made into nobodies. Jesus is one of the thousands and his story is one of just many.

So what is different here? It is that Jesus did get off that cross. His words remind us of many other modern day martyrs. You do not take our lives from us. We give them as a gift that you do not deserve. Think of Martin Luther King Jr or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Out of the awful executions that continued to go on after Jesus’ death, something changed. It did not keep Jesus a nobody. This murder turned him into a somebody.

And that somebody is the model shepherd. There is something special about the way this shepherd leads. Calmly and with much care. Those are the kind of leaders that we follow. Not ones who rant and rave and think that they know the right thing all the time. We follow those who are honest and caring. Those who know us. And that allow us to know them. Think of it this way. Have you ever had a child or a friend who was dating someone you cannot stand. You want to rant and rave about how terrible the boyfriend or girlfriend is for them. You want to forbid them from your house. It just makes your child want to see more of them doesn’t it? But when you just reassure your child that you love them and want the best for them, perhaps they will come around. With gentle nudging and not full on yelling and pushing. We don’t like to be pushed as humans. We want to be led. Like the sheep. Sheep is a good term, not like just followers.

What about those who are not in the fold? The blind man was not in the fold, but he listened to Jesus’ voice and was brought into the fold. Who is missing from the fold? Is it our job to bring others in? Yes. Being a good shepherd is also our calling. We can repeatedly deny our calling. We can say we are not good enough. We aren’t good leaders. Whatever excuse we can come up with. We can be like Peter, when asked, “Surely, you are one of his disciples aren’t you? I am not. But Jesus will not let him say no. Simon Peter, do you love me? Tend my sheep. Feed my lambs. Shepherd my sheep.

So who is missing from our flock? Are they people who have been hurt by the church? People who are too busy? People who have never heard the word? People who need care but don’t know how to seek it? Let’s keep doing what we do well, showing love to our neighbors. But also look out for those who need a little bit of God’s love. Be caring, be honest and lead gently. Can we be good shepherd’s too? Amen.

**John 10:11-18**

11 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The 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. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.16I 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. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No 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.’

## Acts 4:5-12

5 The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem,6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. 7When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ 8Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, 9if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, 10let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. 11This Jesus is  
“the stone that was rejected by you, the builders;  
   it has become the cornerstone.”   
12There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.’