The Gospel of John:  *The Shepherd and the Hireling*  
John 10:11-15

This morning we return once again to the tenth chapter of John’s gospel where we have been for the past few weeks. If you recall, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees who have cast out the once-blind-beggar who now sees and has become a follower of Jesus. In response, Jesus teaches them by use of a parable regarding a shepherd and his sheep (vss. 1-5), though the Pharisees did not understand what Jesus was trying to say (vs. 6). So Jesus interprets His own parable in vss. 7-18, and last week (vss. 7-10) we heard Jesus identify Himself (vs. 7) as “The Door of the sheep.” In vs. 9 Jesus states, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and go in and out and find pasture.” (vs. 9). This morning we will look to the second “I am” statement that Jesus makes about Himself in vss. 11-15. Hear the word of the Lord:

11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) The Altogether Lovely Shepherd; 2) The Predictable Hireling; and 3) The Joy of Knowing and Being Known.

**I. The Altogether Lovely Shepherd**

When you imagine God, what picture comes into your mind? The great theologian A. W. Tozer once wrote, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” I think that is very insightful and true; so once again, consider this question: When you imagine God, what picture comes into your mind?

Many people think of God wrongly. I don’t mean to be judgmental or condemning, but if you think of God in a way other than the way God has revealed Himself in scripture, you are thinking wrongly about God…and that will inform every aspect of your life and worldview. For example: If you think of God as a crusty old dude with white hair who is perpetually irritated and looking for a good reason to send people to hell, that will color the way you pray, teach your children, and treat old people! If you think of God as some hypothetical, metaphysical “first cause” who has no personality, no emotions, and no interest in the affairs of people, that will inform your morality, your attitudes, and your conviction regarding the meaning of life. If you think of God as a man-made construct, such that you believe there is no god, no creator, no judge, and no savior, your worldview begins and ends with yourself and your short time of life—there is no heaven, no hell, no good, no evil…only existence, and then nothing.

What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us…it is the foundation upon which we build our entire worldview. You may claim to not care about God, but here’s what we all know: human beings are helplessly spiritual creatures. We think about God, a lot…and that’s because we want to know how we got here, why we’re here, what we are supposed to be doing with our lives, and what happens after we die. These are “God questions;” so what we think about God serves as the starting place in answering all the questions that all people think about.
As we’ve observed throughout our study of John’s Gospel, the Bible presents multiple pictures of God, but perhaps the most prominent picture in the Old Testament that is consistently present within the New Testament is the picture of God as “our Shepherd.” We have referred regularly to Psalm 23 where David writes, “The Lord is my Shepherd…” and that image is consistent in many books of the OT including Numbers, 1 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Zechariah. When the ancient Israelites imagined God, not only did they picture God as their almighty Creator and Judge, they also pictured God as a loving Shepherd, a good Shepherd…and they saw themselves as “sheep of His pasture.”

Nowhere is the imagery of God as the Shepherd of Israel so beautifully described as in the 23rd Psalm which helps us to see the LORD our Shepherd as present, loving, our leader, our protector, our provider, our champion, our host, and our hope. If you haven’t done so already, commit yourself to memorizing the 23rd Psalm…there is no better image to carry in our minds all day, every day than Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

Now…sprinkled throughout the OT we also find hints and clues of the One who is coming…the Messiah…the anointed One of God…the one born of a virgin…a child born unto us…the son of David whose kingdom will never end. Many of the messianic prophecies are written by the prophet Isaiah, and there is one that is particularly important as we think about God in light of John 10. Listen to this messianic prophecy in Isaiah 40:9–11--

Go on up to a high mountain,
  O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
  O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
  “Behold your God!”
10 Behold, the Lord God comes with might,
  and his arm rules for him;
behold, his reward is with him,
  and his recompense before him.
11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd;
  he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
  and gently lead those that are with young.

The One who is coming…the Savior of Israel, will “tend His flock like a shepherd…” right? Consider now the profound meaning and significance of that which Jesus says to the Pharisees here in John 10:15, “I am the Good Shepherd.”

In this moment, Jesus not only identifies with the prophecies of the Messiah, He makes a claim of Himself that would be equivalent to Isaiah 40:9: “Behold your God!” Jesus does not claim to be “a shepherd;” He states quite clearly, “I am THE Good Shepherd.” The Shepherd of Israel has come in the flesh; He walks among His sheep; and He has the name that is above every name: His name is Jesus!

Alex Maclaren writes about this singular claim in John 10:11:
“I am the Good Shepherd.” Perhaps even Christ never spoke more fruitful words than these. Just think about how many solitary, wearied hearts they have cheered, and what a wealth of encouragement and comfort there has been in them for all generations. The little child as it lays itself down to sleep cries “Jesus, tender Shepherd, hear me, Bless thy little lamb tonight,” and the old man lays himself down to die murmuring to himself, ‘Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’ “I am the Good Shepherd.” No preaching can do anything but weaken and dilute the force of such words, and yet, in all their sweet and homely simplicity they appeal to every heart…”

I don’t know what comes to your mind when you think of God…but here is a powerful image that is accurate and personal: Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Look upon Him…the Lover of our souls…the Savior of mankind…the Redeemer of all that has been corrupted! He is our Shepherd, and He is the GOOD Shepherd! But what do we mean by “good?” I’m so glad you asked! It’s time for the Geek with the Greek.

There are two Greek terms frequently translated as “good” in the English language. The first Greek term is agathos which refers simply to the moral quality of a thing. In other words, honesty is good, not evil, right? That’s agathos. However, the second Greek term of good is kalos, and kalos has a deeper, richer meaning. Kalos refers to something that is altogether lovely, good to the core, and a beauty to behold. It’s not just that Jesus is good at being a shepherd, or that he is a morally good shepherd as opposed to a morally evil shepherd. Kalos says that this shepherd is beautiful in the way He is, in the way He cares for the sheep…not just because of his abilities, but especially because of His heart and His character.

How many of you grew up watching Little House on the Prairie? Don’t be shy gentlemen…it’s OK to admit it! I enjoy Little House on the Prairie, but my wife LOVES that series and even bought the DVD collection! OK, for those of you don’t know what I’m talking about, there was a long running series about Laura Ingalls and her family placed in the town of Independence, KS back in the late 1800’s. It was aired in the 70’s, and the stories featured simple, wholesome lessons from a simpler time in our nation’s history. Anyways, I’m wondering how many of you remember ol’ Doc Baker? Doc Baker was the only doctor in the little town of Independence, KS, and he was the epitome of “the good doctor,” remember that? He was good in that he was loving, sacrificial, moral, and faithful. Doc Baker was there to deliver the babies, treat the flu, take out a bullet, and comfort the dying. Doc Baker wasn’t just good, he was gentle and beautiful in his goodness. That’s kalos…and that’s the picture presented here of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

What makes Jesus so beautiful, lovely, and good? Look at what follows beginning with the end of vs. 11, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Question: how many of you would die for sheep? Right…that seems a bit unreasonable to most of us. If it comes to saving myself or saving a bunch of stinky sheep, the sheep are going down…that’s the way most of us think about sheep. However, if you were a shepherd…if you knew these sheep since they were baby lambs…if you named each one, shaved each one, fed each one, and loved on each one year after year…you would probably feel differently about those sheep. They would be like your family, right? If you were a shepherd, you would do whatever you could to defend your sheep. And by the way, that was the law of the land for shepherds. Shepherds were expected to care for and defend the sheep—they were accountable for every animal in the flock. However, a good shepherd—the most loving kind of a shepherd—would even lay his life down for the sheep. He would lay in front of the sheepfold and serve as the door to protect the sheep from wolves.
sneaking in at night. And, when it came to it, the shepherd would face down the wolf, the lion, or the bear in order to protect the sheep, even if it cost him his life.

Jesus appeals to this familiar imagery and says, “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Please allow me to geek out with the Greek one more time here because it’s important.

Last week we heard Jesus say in vs. 10 “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” Just now we read that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. We’ve talked about this before, but I would remind you that there are three different words in the Greek language for the English word “life.” There is bios, which is the physical life. Then there is zoe, which is the eternal life of God known only through the human spirit. And then there is psyche which is the mental, emotional, soul or being of a person.

So, here is what Jesus is saying in John 10: I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his psyche…his very soul…for the sheep…so that they may have zoe…the eternal life of God…and have it abundantly! I hope you see that there is an exchange that takes place here. Jesus is not saying that He is the Good Shepherd because He is willing to die for his cause, or to set a good moral example. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He exchanges His self…His soul, His very being if you will…so that the sheep might have the eternal kind of life and have it abundantly. This is what makes Jesus beautiful, lovely, and good. He loves His sheep that much. He knows each of us by name. He lays down His life for you…and me. Church, Nobody could ever love you more than your Shepherd. And that is what should come to your minds whenever you think of God, amen?

II. The Predictable Hireling

Notice how the goodness of the Shepherd stands in stark contrast to the predictable unfaithfulness of the hireling. Listen to what Jesus says beginning with vs. 12:

He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

Jesus is clearly associating the Pharisees, “the shepherds of Israel,” with the hirelings in this story. Unlike Jesus-the-Good-Shepherd, the Pharisees care nothing about the blind beggar, nor have they ever cared about this lost and hurting sheep who has languished outside the gate of the temple year after year. The contrast between Jesus, who will lay down His life for lost people, and the Pharisees, who rule God’s people harshly without mercy, is beautifully captured in this comparison between the Good Shepherd and the hireling.

Church, in every profession you have those who are all in, and those who work only to get paid…the hirelings. It’s the difference between the schoolteacher who creates individual lesson plans for the kids who are struggling versus the teacher who simply fails the students who can’t keep up. It’s the difference between the waitress who works to memorize the names of her regular customers and their favorite dishes versus the waitress who cares nothing about the customers as evidenced by her foul attitude and her lack of attention to the empty glasses on the table. It’s the lawyer who looks for any excuse to bill $400/hour versus the lawyer who spends
her weekends doing pro bono work for battered women who can’t afford to pay for the help they need to escape their abusers.

Hirelings are common, but hirelings are deadly when they occupy positions of leadership.

In the ancient world, when a shepherd was sick or injured, the owner of the sheep might have no choice but to hire a day-laborer from town who would simply agree to tend the sheep in the absence of the shepherd. It wasn’t a bad gig for the most part, right? You hang out in the country, maybe read a good book, take some snacks, catch up on your knitting—think “substitute teacher”…how hard could it be?

From a distance, the hireling might very well resemble a shepherd. He might dress like a shepherd; walk like a shepherd; maybe even carry a staff like a shepherd. If the hireling stayed out there with the sheep for a week or two, he might even think of himself as a shepherd…that is, until the wolves showed up. You see, hirelings can look the part of a shepherd until the testing comes…until things get hard and conflict arises. It is at such times that courage, commitment, and sacrifice are required…but these are not the qualities of a hireling. Why? Because the hireling does not love the sheep. The hireling does not own the sheep, nor does the hireling fear or love the Owner of the sheep.

The hireling employee does not love his company or his co-workers. The hireling teacher does not love her students. The hireling lawyer does not love his clients or even the law he has sworn to uphold. Hirelings care for themselves, so when the threat comes…when their loyalty, courage and character is tested, they run…leaving the sheep to be snatched and scattered by the wolves.

And let me tell you something about wolves. Even to this day, a pack of wolves will attack a herd of sheep or cattle and they will kill every single animal in the herd. They won’t eat much, and the rest will go to waste. Wolves kill…that’s just what wolves do. Hirelings abandon the sheep when the wolves come…that’s just what hirelings do.

So, here’s the picture Jesus just painted for us: we—the Flock—are at once and the same time under a dual threat as the sheep of God’s pasture—threats from the outside, and threats from the inside. We are always under threat from the wolves that come from outside the flock to snatch and scatter the sheep. The wolves are those who have destruction on their hearts. We know we have a spiritual enemy who is Satan, the ancient Liar, and his minions, who are spiritual wolves that hate the sheep of God. And then there are “thieves and robbers,” who have come only to steal, kill and destroy. These are evil people, those given over to the Father of Lies who knowingly or unknowingly do his bidding.

At the same time, we are sometimes subject to the careless cowardice of hirelings who are inside the fold…those who profess faith in Jesus, who say all the right things, look the part, act the part…until trouble comes: and then they flee, abandoning the sheep. These hirelings play the part of the under-shepherd to make a paycheck, to enjoy the perks, to be called “Pastor” and to enjoy the honor that comes with leadership. But when wolves threaten the sheep…when thieves sneak over the fence and try to steal, kill, and destroy the sheep…they run off to “play shepherd” in a greener pasture…and the sheep are scattered.
Church, be careful who you follow. Don’t follow a hireling. How do you know the difference between a true shepherd and a hireling? Watch what happens when trouble comes. Troubled times will reveal the character of a leader…troubled times reveals the character of us all, amen?

Please allow me to personally comment upon this passage for just a moment…

Every pastor who serves as an under-shepherd will tell you that this passage is haunting and challenging. No pastor wants to fall into the category of “hireling,” and yet we all know that we don’t qualify as THE Good Shepherd either! I am not Jesus, though I do believe the Holy Spirit lives in me, empowering me to do what I have been called and set apart to do as your under-shepherd. Still, pastors are both sheep and shepherds…we are Christ’s representatives, we have been charged to love, care for, and feed the Lord’s sheep…but we are also sheep of His pasture—so that’s complicated!

I will confess to you that this passage regarding the hireling has caused me to do some serious soul-searching this week. I have asked myself over and over again, “Am I a hireling?” Do I tend the Sheep only because I get paid to do so? Would I love God’s sheep and serve them even if I wasn’t getting a paycheck? Am I willing to lay down my life for the sheep, to fight off the wolves, to root out the thieves, whatever the cost?

Church, I will confess that there is still some hireling in me…sadly. I have days when all I want to do is run…to abandon the sheep and start my fishing guide business! I confess there are days when the paycheck keeps me at my post…and that is a “hireling” quality. I would ask you to pray for me, that God would root out any hireling nature within me that I might become a better shepherd.

That said, I also know that there is within me a fierce love for God’s Church…a protective love…and at times, a sacrificial love. I remember just over 10 years ago when we received a letter from our former denomination threatening to shut down our church and to confiscate our property. The wolves were at the door. I remember the fierce love that those wolves aroused within my spirit for God’s sheep…it was a fierce love that I saw in the eyes of many of our leaders. There was no doubt in our minds on that day: we would stand and fight to protect God’s sheep whatever the cost, and that is what we did at great cost for the better part of two years. I still feel that fierce and protective love for each and every one of you…I mean that from the bottom of my heart. I might prod you with my shepherd’s staff every now and then, but hey, that’s what shepherds do, right! Seriously, I love you Church, and I will do my best to be your under-shepherd along with the other pastors and elders as long as God allows me to stay in this position…but listen: we know who THE Good Shepherd is, amen? Jesus is The Good Shepherd—we know Him, and He knows us!

**III. The Joy of Knowing and Being Known**

Jesus concludes this part of His teaching in vss. 14-15 with the most profound statement in this thought unit: 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.
Church, I don’t know if you caught what Jesus just said, but it is mind blowing. He just compared His relationship with us…His Church…to His relationship with the Father! He said, “I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

How does Jesus know you? Just as Jesus knows the Father! So how does Jesus know the Father? How does He express His “knowing” in that relationship? He says multiple times in John 17: “Father…we are one.”

Oneness is marriage language, right? Man and wife are to be as one. Oneness is your relationship with your very best friend in the world who knows you better than you know you! Oneness means never having to fear betrayal or getting blindsided…there is a safety, an intimacy, and a joy that only Oneness provides. Jesus enjoys that oneness with the Father. How do we know?

Because He lays His life down for the sheep. I hope you get this, and I’ll come back to it next week…but listen: Jesus faces the cross; He submits Himself to insults, false charges, flogging, and 9” nails because He has complete and utter confidence in the ONENESS that He enjoys with the Father. That Oneness is what kept Jesus from running in the Garden of Gethsemane. That Oneness is what keeps Jesus on the cross so that we might be saved and inherit the eternal zoe…the eternal kind of life that begins the moment we walk through The Door…who is our Good Shepherd!

But check this out Church: Jesus just said that His love and relationship with us…His knowing and being known with US…is JUST AS His Oneness and His knowing and being known with the Father!

You think you get that…but you don’t. I don’t. What Jesus just said is a mystery beyond my ability to grasp. But here’s at least what that means for you and for me if we belong to Jesus: we never, ever, ever, ever…EVER…have to worry about being betrayed or blindsided by Jesus…ever. We don’t need to explain ourselves to Him; we don’t have to impress Him; we don’t have to beg Him to listen to us; we don’t have to worry that He has other things on His mind when we are talking to Him; we don’t have to worry that He is rolling His eyes at us; we don’t have to worry that Jesus has stopped loving us when we have been acting very unlovable! Do you get this Church? Jesus KNOWS His own! He knows you like He knows His own Father! By the way, biblical knowing means intimacy at a supernatural level…it is affection, it is warmth, it is beauty…biblical knowing is JOY!

But there’s more: Jesus also said, “My own KNOW me…just as the Father knows me.” I can already read your minds: “But there’s so much I don’t know. I can’t see Jesus. I can’t sit down with Him and ask Him all my questions in person. I can’t feel His arms around me and I so long to feel His arms around me!” Ahhh…but if you belong to Jesus, you KNOW Him…you do!

You KNOW Him because more and more each day, He occupies your thoughts; He informs your decisions; He stirs in your spirit; He restores your soul. You KNOW Him in your heart…just as the Father and the Son know each other in the HEART…and that kind of knowing is far deeper and more mysterious than the knowing of the intellect or the experiences of the flesh.
Church, the gift of Oneness…the gift of knowing and being known in the most loving, intimate and unconditional way possible…that Oneness is the Zoe…it is the eternal kind of life that Jesus gave up His soul for us to enjoy! And if you are His sheep…if you belong to Him…that Zoe is now yours…forever! The knowing and being known by our Good Shepherd is what changes the human heart…it is Christ in us, the hope of glory! I will return to this theme next week, but for now…picture Him in your mind’s eye. The Lord is our Shepherd…He is The Good Shepherd…He is our altogether lovely Shepherd, amen? Follow Him. Let us pray.