

John 10: 11-18

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A HIRED HAND AND BEING AN OWNER? THERE'S A STORY ABOUT TWO MEN...ED AND TOMMY WHO WERE DUCK HUNTING ON A RIVER. THEY HAD BEEN OUT ALL DAY IN TOMMY'S BOAT, SHARING IN THE ENJOYMENT OF HUNTING IN HIS BOAT BUT IT WAS GETTING LATE SO THEY PULLED IN THE DECOY DUCKS, GATHERED UP THEIR STUFF, AND PUT IT ALL IN THE BOAT. THEY PULLED UP ON THE BANK OF THE RIVER AND BEGAN HAULING EVERYTHING INTO THE TRUCK. BUT ON THE SECOND TRIP BACK TO THE BOAT TO GET MORE OF THE STUFF TO LOAD UP, THEY REALIZED THE BOAT HAD DRIFTED OFF OUT INTO THE WATER. IT DRIFTED OUT TEN FEET, THEN FIFTEEN FEET, AND THEN TWENTY FEET OUT INTO THE MAIN CURRENT OF THE WATER.

THAT WAS THE MOMENT OF TRUTH. SOMEONE HAD TO COMMIT TO GO OUT AND GET THE BOAT. IT WAS CLEAR WHO WOULD BE THE ONE WHO WOULD HAVE TO STRIP DOWN AND JUMP IN THE FREEZING COLD WATER AND SWIM OUT TO GET THE BOAT. IT WASN'T ED, WHO WAS MERELY ENJOYING THE USE OF THE BOAT, IT WAS TOMMY WHO OWNED THE BOAT. ED CHEERED HIM ON AS HE TORE OFF HIS JUMPSUIT, DOVE INTO THE RIVER, AND GOT THE BOAT.

JESUS SAYS, "I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD. THE GOOD SHEPHERD LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS SHEEP." THREE TIMES IN OUR READING, JESUS SAYS THAT HE IS LAYING HIS LIFE DOWN FOR THE SHEEP: ONCE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE READING, THEN IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR READING, AND ONCE AGAIN AT THE END OF OUR READING. JESUS WANTS TO MAKE SURE WE UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A GOOD SHEPHERD IS TO BE INVESTED ENOUGH TO PAY THE ULTIMATE COST FOR TENDING THE SHEEP. THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS INVESTED IN THE SHEEP; IT IS PERSONAL TO HIM. THEY ARE NOT JUST HIS RESPONSIBILITY; THEY ARE LIKE FAMILY TO HIM. HE KNOWS EACH OF THEM, CAN TELL THEM APART; HE KNOWS THEIR NAME, AND THEY, IN TURN, KNOW THE SOUND OF HIS VOICE.

THAT IS DIFFERENT FOR SOMONEONE WHO IS HIRED TO DO A JOB. FOR THE HIRED HAND, IT'S ALL A TRANSACTION. YOU PAY ME SO MUCH MONEY AND AT THE END OF THE DAY, I GO HOME, TAKE A SHOWER, AND FORGET ABOUT THE SHEEP. SAD IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO A SHEEP ON THE HIRED HANDS WATCH, BUT IT IS NOT THE SAME FOR THE ONE WHO FEELS AN OWNERSHIP OF THE SHEEP. THE OWNDER IS INVESTED IN A WAY THE HIRED HAND NEVER WILL BE. GOOD SHEPHERDS AND SHEEP STAY TOGETHER.

A TOURIST WRITES ABOUT HIS VISIT TO BETHLEHEM TO SEE THE BIRTHPLACE OF JESUS. HE SHARED THERE IS A CHURCH BUILT OVER A CAVE WITH ALL THE BELLS AND WHISTLES OF A CHURCH. IT WAS INTERESTING, BUT NOT WHAT HE REMEMBERED MOST. MORE INTERESTING, HE SAID, WAS HAVING THE GUIDE TAKE THE GROUP TO A FIELD AND SHOW SOME SHEPHERDS WATCHING THEIR FLOCKS BY NIGHT. THE GUIDE POINTED OUT THAT, OFTENTIMES, SHEPHERDS AND THEIR SHEEP GATHER TOGETHER. BUT WHAT HAPPENS IF ALL THE SHEEP GET MIXED UP WITH OTHER FLOCKS? WHEN THE TIME COMES TO SEPARATE THE SHEEP, HOW DO YOU DIVIDE THE SHEEP? FORTUNATELY, IT ISN'T A PROBLEM. THE SHEEP KNOW THE VOICE OF THE ONE WHO IS THEIR SHEPHERD. A CLICK OR A COUPLE OF NOTES SUNG AND THEY GO AND FOLLOW THE ONE THEY HAVE COME TO TRUST AND NOT THE

STRANGER. SUCH IS THE INTIMACY OF THE SHEPHERD AND THE SHEEP. THEY ARE LIKE FAMILY.

SHEEP ARE KNOWN AS FLOCK ANIMALS. THEY LIKE TO BE TOGETHER. THEY DON'T DO WELL ON THEIR OWN. THERE IS SAFETY IN NUMBERS, AND SHEEP SEEM TO KNOW THIS. SO, THEY TEND TO SPEND A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER, AND THEY FIND BENEFIT FROM DOING SO. THEY ARE LIKE FAMILY.

WHEN WE ARE FAMILY, WE STICK TOGETHER AND WE STAND UP FOR EACH OTHER. A WOMAN NAMED BARBARA WAS VISITING A FRIEND IN CALIFORNIA. THEY WERE AT THE AIRPORT AND GETTING INTO HER FRIEND'S CAR WHEN BARBARA ACCIDENTALLY SWUNG OPEN THE CAR DOOR AND IT KNOCKED UP AGAINST THE MIRROR OF A FANCY RED SPORTS CAR. THE MAN WHO OWNED THE SPORTS CAR HAPPENED TO BE IN THE PARKED CAR WHEN THIS HAPPENED AND HE JUMPED OUT OF THE CAR AND STARTED TO YELL AT BARBARA...WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE YOU DONG?

AT THIS POINT, THE FRIEND'S FRIEND WHO WAS ALONG GOT OUT OF THE CAR AND SHOUTED, "DON'T TALK TO HER LIKE THAT! SHE DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO YOUR CARE. LOOK IT'S ALL FINE. THE MAN IN THE RED CAR YELLED BACK, "STAY OUT OF THIS. THIS IS BETWEEN ME AND HER." AND THEN BARBARA'S FRIEND'S FRIEND SAID, "WELL, WHEN YOU ARE TALKING TO MY FRIEND, YOU ARE TALKING TO ME."

GOOD FRIENDS DO THIS FOR EACH OTHER. WE KNOW THAT WE NO LONGER STAND IN THIS WORLD ALONE. WE STAND TOGETHER.

REV. JOHN BOYLE FOUGHT IN WW II, IN PATTON'S ARMY, AND WAS PART OF THE PUSH TO RESCUE THE TROOPS WHOHAD BEEN TRAPPED IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE. IN A SERMON, HE SHARED A STORY ABOUT ONE NIGHT WHEN THEY WERE IN COMBAT. HIS INFANTRY UNIT HAD BEEN ORDERED TO MOVE OUT TO ANOTHER LOCATION WHEN IT BECAME APPARENT THAT THE AREA WHERE THEY DUG IN HAD BECOME INFILTRATED BY THE ENEMY. THEY WERE TO PROCEED SILENTLY, SINGLE FILE, EACH ONE HOLDING ON TO THE AMMO BELT OF THE ONE IN FRONT OF THEM. AT ONE POINT, JOHN STEPPED INTO A DEPRESSION IN THE GROUND, LOST HIS FOOTING AND HIS GRIP ON THE MAN IN FRONT OF HIM, CAUSING THE MAN BEHIND HIM TO LOSE HIS GRIP ON HIM. SUDDENLY, JOHN HAD BEEN CUT OFF FROM HIS UNIT AS IT CONTINUED TO MOVE FORWARD. HE WAS ISOLATED IN WHAT WAS NOW BECOMING ENEMY TERRITORY. HE WAS PETRIFIED WITH FEAR AND PANIC. MANDATED NOT TO MAKE A SOUND, HE COULD NOT CRY OUT. SUDDENLY, HE FELT A HAND GRAB HIS SHOULDER. STARTLED, HE DID NOT KNOW WHETHER THE HNAD BELONGED TO FRIEND OR FOE, WHETHER HE WAS TO GET A BAYONET IN HIS BELLY OR A KNIFE TO HIS THROAT, AND WHETHER HE SHOULD RUN OR SHOOT OR BOTH. THEN HE HEARD A VOICE IN A LOW WHISPER IN HIS EAR CALLING HIM BY NAME, "JOHN, IT'S ME, GEORGE," AND HE KNEW HE HAD BECOME RECONNECTED WITH SOMEONE WHO KNEW HIM, AND THAT HE WAS NO LONGER LOST. HIS SHEPHERD HAD FOUND HIM AND CALLED HIM BY NAME.

"I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD. I LAY DOWN MY LIFE FOR THEM. I KNOW MY OWN AND MY OWN KNOW ME. THEY KNOW THE SOUND OF MY VOICE." THE WHOLE OF OUR SCRIPTURE

THIS MORNING TELLS US OF THE DEVOTION OF JESUS TO EACH OF US. HE IS OUR SHEPHERD, WHO WILL NOT LET US GO. THERE IS ONE OFTEN OVERLOOKED PART OF JOHN'S GOSPEL. WHEN JESUS IS BEING ARRESTED, HE TELLS HIS CAPTORS THAT HE IS THE ONE THEY ARE LOOKING FOR AND TO LET HIS DISCIPLES GO. JESUS DID WHAT HE HAD SAID IN A PREVIOUS PRAYER TO GOD, "FATHER, I HAVE NOT LOST ONE OF THOSE YOU GAVE ME."

SHOULD WE NOT LOVE EACH OTHER IN THE SAME WAY? WE ARE ALL SHEEP TOGETHER. WE ARE GATHERED BY THE SHEPHERD WHO KNOWS OUR NAME AND WE KNOW HIS VOICE. WE FOLLOW HIS VOICE AND WHERE HE LEADS US. AND WE LOVE EACH OTHER WITH THE SAME DEVOTION THAT JESUS OUR SHEPHERD HAS SHOWN US. WE STICK TOGETHER. WHEN ONE SUFFERES, WE SUFFER WITH THEM. WHEN ONE REJOICES, WE REJOICE WITH THEM. BENJAMIN FRANKLIN SAID AFTER THE ARGUMENTS WERE DONE AND THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE HAD BEEN SIGNED, "WELL, GENTLEMEN, WE MUST NOW ALL HANG TOGETHER, OR WE WILL SURELY ALL HANG SEPARATELY."

DOESN'T IT FEEL GREAT TO KNOW THAT WE ARE EACH IN A FLOCK AND WE ARE SO MUCH STRONGER TOGETHER THAN WHEN WE ARE APART? SAY WHAT YOU LIKE ABOUT SHEEP. THEY ARE MINDLESS. THEY ARE LACKING INDIVIDUALITY. THEY CAN APPEAR SO PAINFULLY PASSIVE. THEY ALL THINK ALIKE IF THEY THINK AT ALL. BUT THE ONE THING THEY KNOW IS HOW NECESSARY IT IS THAT THEY HAVE EACH OTHER. THEY KNOW THEY ARE BETTER OFF TOGETHER THAN APART. THEY STICK TOGETHER.

IT IS OUR DEEPEST LONGING TO BELONG, TO BE PART OF SOMETHING. IT IS WHAT MAKES US HUMAN AND TO MAKE LIVING WORTH IT, TO KNOW THAT WE ARE LOVED. TO REALIZE WE ARE CARED FOR AND THERE ARE THOSE WE CARE ABOUT, THAT IN THIS CRAZY WORLD THERE IS A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE KNOW YOUR NAME AND WHOSE VOICES WE RECOGNIZE WHEN THEY SPEAK TO US.

WE ARE ALL SHEEP. AND THAT IS NOT SUCH A BAD THING. THE GOOD SHEPHERD IS A POWERFUL IMAGE FOR US---WHO HUNGER FOR CONNECTION IN A SOCIETY THAT VALUES INDIVIDUALISM AND SECULARISM. WHEN YOU SPEND ANY TIME STUDYING SCRIPTURE, IT BECOMES VERY OBVIOUS THAT GOD'S PLAN IS FOR US TO BE TOGETHER, IN A COMMUNITY OF FAITH LIKE THIS ONE. YOU MIGHT REMEMBER THAT THE FIRST THING JESUS DOES WHEN HE BEGINS HIS MINISTRY, IS TO CALL A GROUP OF DISCIPLES TOGETHER.

JESUS ASKS US TO FOLLOW. HE'S NOT GOING TO PUSH US. HE'S NOT GOING TO FORCE US. INSTEAD, JESUS KEEPS CALLING US, IN MANY AND VARIOUS WAYS, AND INVITING US OVER AND OVER TO FOLLOW HIM. HE PROMISES TO LEAD US, TO PROTECT US, AND EVEN TO LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US. AND HE INVITES US TO TRUST HIM. TRUST HIM AND FOLLOW HIM. AMEN.

