

Sermon delivered in Westwood UMC on April 21, 2024

**JOHN 10:11-18 (NRSV)**

11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

12 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.

13 The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care 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.

16 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.

17 For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

18 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."

**[Good Shepherd]**

Let me share a story about my part-time job as a waiter in a restaurant. Because I speak Spanish, I was able to quickly get to know the people I worked with. As I worked, I got to know them.

At first, they thought that my work as a waiter was my main job. However, when they realized I was working part-time and studying, they asked me what I was studying. And I replied that I was studying theology.

Then he asked again:

"If you study theology, what do you do when you graduate?"

"Mostly, they become pastors!" was my answer.

My friend, who asked that question at that time looked me in the eye, blinked twice or thrice, and said the following:

"Aren't pastors crooks(cheaters or schemers)?"

My other friend, working next to him, chimed in and said this:

"That's right, all the pastors I've ever known were thieves."

As I listened, I was struck by this story. Because it sounded like they were asking me, "Are you going to be a crook, a thief too?"

(A little clarification may be needed, so here it is. Often, working-class Latin brothers and sisters tend to think of white-collar or administrative jobs that don't involve breaking a sweat as pointless,

and their understanding of pastors in particular is often misunderstood as lazy people who always have nice clothes and don't work.)

I tried to explain to them what it means to be a pastor. But they weren't having it. They used words like cheaters and thieves to describe the pastors they had met. After that, they often teased me by calling me "pastor" or "pastor Lim"

It was the day that I realized that the word pastor is a polluted word for people who think of pastors as thieves and liars.

Do you have any words, nouns or verbs, that have been poisoned like this? Do you have a word that was originally a good word, but needs to be described with something like an adjective?

There is a unique expression of Jesus that appears in our reading from the Gospel of John today.

Specifically, it's a phrase that Jesus uses to describe who he is.

It's called I AM (ego eimi).

It's a very unique expression that doesn't appear in the other synoptic gospels. Jesus used the adjective "good" to describe the noun shepherd. "I am the good shepherd" Jesus then goes on to explain that a good shepherd is one who lays down his life for the sheep.

I think Jesus' way of explaining this text was to overcome people's stereotypes.

This is because the understanding of shepherds at the time was that they were not laying down their lives for the sheep, but rather the sheep were the exchange and value of something.

The shepherd didn't exist for the sheep, the sheep existed for the shepherd.

In other words, Jesus' phrase, the hired shepherd, was probably a better description of the common shepherd of that time.

In fact, we know that Jesus was a carpenter by occupation. However, it's also possible that Jesus had part-time job experience as a shepherd (like I did). And I think it's possible that in that part-time job, Jesus realized that words were contaminated by people's preconceptions. That makes Jesus' use of the phrase "good shepherd" even more meaningful today.

The shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, that's probably not what Jesus' audience would have understood. Instead of a human shepherd laying down his life for the sheep, a more appropriate description might have been a sheep laying down his life for a human.

By resetting the relationship between sheep and shepherd, Jesus is demonstrating what is good.

It's an attempt to overcome the relationship between sheep and shepherds.

It's no longer master and servant!

It's no longer the relationship between superior and inferior!

It's no longer tenant and owner!

It's no longer about the sheep being property and part of the owner's possessions!

The shepherd and the sheep communicate with each other through conversation!

The shepherd knows the sheep by name, and the sheep hear and follow the shepherd's voice!

The shepherd is not hired, but serves.

Jesus' interpretation of the new shepherd gives us a glimpse into the heart of Jesus.

It is the teaching of Jesus' life to share the selfless, life-giving heart of God. And it's not just Jesus' heart that is here. Through Jesus, God is revealing that God is our shepherd, that God is the good shepherd, the true shepherd, the one who willingly gives God's self for us.

Through Jesus Christ, and through his particular rhetoric, we are given a glimpse into the heart of God. That God is the one who lays down even God's own for us. So when we use the adjective good for God, it means more than just good as we normally use it.

Religion is usually approached from a philosophical perspective, or from the perspective of enlightenment, or from the perspective of seeking truth, or from the perspective of explaining things, because it needs to be explained to someone.

Christianity, however, takes a slightly different approach. It has a narrative of God sacrificing Godself for humanity.

In other religions, I've yet to hear a story where the gods sacrificed themselves for humans; it's always been about humans sacrificing themselves for the gods.

But today, through Jesus' story of the "Good Shepherd," we're actually realizing the heart of God, Jesus, who sacrificed himself for us.

It doesn't make any sense, which is why we use the word mystery.

I think the reason philosophy develops and grows within Christianity is because it tries to explain what cannot be explained.

However, philosophy is not the core value of Christianity (it's just necessary for ease of explanation). The real value is in restoring goodness, and that goodness is manifested in selfless love and grace.

To wrap up this message, I want to share a final story about a friend I met at the beginning.

I worked part-time in the restaurant for about a month and a half.

And around the time I was leaving the restaurant, I received a gift from a friend of mine who had said, " Pastors are liars, thieves."

He gave me a precious pair of socks that he said he never wore, that he could use with his suit.

And he said these words to me

"Que sea un buen pastor, my friend Lucas"

(Be a good pastor, my friend Lucas)

Even in the age we live in today, we live in a time when using nouns to describe someone isn't always enough.

That's why, like Jesus, we need the adjective "good."

That adjective requires courage not only to express it but to live it.

Like Jesus and like God, I want you and me to be good Christians, good shepherds.

May you and I be the kind of people who make the world good and beautiful so that the world is returned to God with its beauty as it is. Amen, let us pray.

We live in a world where we're surrounded by polluted words, contaminated relationships, and damaged relationships.

It's hard to trust anyone, and it seems like a pointless sacrifice.

God, may you give us the beautiful courage to cleanse the world.

May we never forget that this idea of a shepherd laying down one's life for the sheep is not just a metaphor but the heart and action of God.

And so may we live lives that purify the world, beautify our relationships, and bring truth to the language we use, all in the name of Jesus Christ, the one who first did and sustains all these things. Amen.