

## “The Good Shepherd”

John 10:11-18  
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On one of our last days in Malawi last week, we four missionaries decided to take a long walk in a direction we had not yet pursued. We crossed the railroad tracks heading toward Kaputu School, passed an abandoned cotton gin, chatted with passersby, then took a left and a right and another left. I kept hinting that we were making a big loop and would end up where we started. That's when we heard the hurrying footsteps behind us. Sprinting as if in a track meet, a young man caught up with us; said his parents had sent him to ask if we were lost! I assured him that we were just fine, that we were confident of the path ahead. He gave us that look that says, 'huh huh.' He turned back, and we continued. We continued right to the end of the path where it reached a local graveyard. This is where we realized we were, indeed, lost. The good shepherd had come to us, but we heeded him not! As we stood there wondering where to turn next, we realized how amazing it was for perfect strangers to notice us, to care about our welfare, to warn us of the dead end path we were following, and to send a son to our aid. It felt really good to know somebody cared! Retracing our steps, we reached familiar territory!

This story from our mission trip seemed like a good entrée to the Gospel lesson for today about the Good Shepherd. It seemed that we had had a personal encounter with a very good shepherd. The young man who tracked us down and the parents who sent him embodied the essence of the Good Shepherd. They observed four lost sheep and they acted from a place of caring. I would say that those three villagers demonstrated on that occasion how to be Christ's body in the world, how to extend the Good Shepherd metaphor into the present time.

I know of a UCC church in rural Arizona that calls itself The Church of the Good Shepherd. I've been thinking this week that all local churches might think of themselves as good shepherd churches, as communities whose ministry it is to notice souls headed down dead end roads, souls wounded by life's hammers, souls discouraged by life's disappointments; and respond decisively from the place of deep caring.

In many settings, the minister, or the pastor, or the priest is thought to be the shepherd of the flock. But in John's Gospel, there is an invitation for the church to consider thinking of itself, corporately, as the Good Shepherd, as the embodiment of Christ's caring way, as the eyes that see where caring is needed.

In the Gospel text for today, John differentiates the Good Shepherd from the hired hand. The hired hand sees the pain of the world and walks away from it. The hired hand sees the dangers and the pit falls and the hungers and the wounds and turns a blind eye to it all. But the Good Shepherd reacts differently, chooses to get involved, doesn't shy away from a few risks, rolls up the sleeves and gets to work; is willing to lay down his life for the other. The hired hand feels no responsibility or compassion for the one who is vulnerable. It's no skin off his chin if someone is lost or afraid or addicted or afflicted or without self-esteem. I don't know any churches named, "Church of the Hired Hand."

A good shepherd church is one that forms a support group for adults who are caretakers for their parents or for a spouse. Our support group meets once each month.

A good shepherd church is one that values four-legged creatures as well as two-legged ones, goes to bat for abandoned cats, bakes treats for shelter dogs, blesses pets through the laying on of hands. Our animal ministry team meets occasionally.

A good shepherd church is one that notices empty oil tanks and contributes to the local fuel bank. Our mission ministry team does this annually.

A good shepherd church is one that is conscious of those living in convalescent homes and sends volunteers to lead worship, to hold hands, and to sing songs of joy. Our Salmon Brook ministry team shows up on the fourth Sunday of each month. That would be today!

A good shepherd church is one whose pasture extends all the way around the world. Four of us went to that distant pasture on April 6<sup>th</sup>. We noticed a woman there who had lost her self-esteem. In selling her body she had contracted AIDS. A micro loan from this church had enabled her to start a wholesome business selling sacks of salt in the villages. Medicines have restored her body. The caring that made this new business possible has restored her soul. As we sat and listened to her tell her story, we felt moved to buy one of her products, a simple bag of salt. Here it is, a symbol of a good shepherd church, a church that cares enough to tend to a wounded sheep half way around the world.

In announcing to the disciples that he is the Good Shepherd, Jesus is also giving the church its identity. We are to be Christ's body in this world. We are to be a Good Shepherd church. And I thank God that many here have caught this vision already. May we find refreshing new ways to live into this sacred identity; and thereby remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.