

## **John 10:11-18**

<sup>11</sup>“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

<sup>14</sup>I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup>just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. <sup>18</sup>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.”

Many of you may know that Karen and I have been rescuing dogs since 2014. In those 10 years, we have rescued 32 dogs. For quite awhile, we only adopted old dogs - the ones nobody else wanted. Many have been blind or deaf, many have had to wear diapers, most are anything but “perfect” to most people. But, they are all perfect to us.

The most we have had at one time in the house is 15, which was recently. On March 24, we lost a 17 year old who had come to us on hospice, along with her sister. The sister, a spicy, 17 year old Chihuahua that we named Frito, only lived 3 months with us before her back legs

completely gave out and we had to have her put down. Unfortunately, we had 3 put down on the same day. Frito, as well as Poppy, who was a 10 year old Schnauzer that Karen and Abigail drove all the way to Missouri to get after her mom died and her dad got Parkinson's so could no longer care for her, and Izzy, a 14 year old Havanese with doggy dementia whose mom had also died. I am not going to tell you the backgrounds of all 32 dogs, but I will tell you this: there are a lot of cruel people in this world.

Just a couple of examples: George and Johnny, 12 very old Chihuahuas were used for dog fighting. When they were no longer valuable, they were placed in a bag and left on the road in Bagley. They were 3.2 and 3.8 pounds when they were found. Both had no bottom jaws and were covered in fleas and ticks. Their toenails were so overgrown, they could barely walk.

Iris, a 1 year old blind pitbull was left on a rail-less bridge over a canyon. It was as if the person dumped her in hopes that she would fall off the bridge.

Lucille was sold at an auction while pregnant. She lived in squalor and did not understand positive human touch at all. We figure she was probably bred a minimum of 15 times in her life, never lived inside, and fought for every meal. So far, she is the most broken dog we have adopted. Every day is difficult, but every day we see small glimpses of hope.

Raspberry was found tied to a stake in the middle of a field in the Winter, here in Northern MN.

We fell in love with every single dog we have ever had, whether it be for 1 month (the shortest amount of time) or for going on 7 years with a couple of them. When Peaches

passed away last month, we were both devastated. Peaches was with us only 15 months, but she made a huge impact on our lives.

Sometimes, people don't understand why it hurts so much to lose one of our dogs, especially since we still have 14 others. It's like people understand the pain of losing a dog (or any pet) when you only have 1 - the house is now quiet, and you have lost your only fur baby who occupied a big piece of your heart. But, when we still have 14 others, it may be hard to understand why we miss one so much.

Well, I am by no means equating myself to Jesus, but... this is how He feels when He loses one of His sheep as well. He may have millions of sheep, but He knows each one of them by name. He loves each one, knows each one,

and is deeply saddened when one is lost. Jesus understands how we feel when just one of our dogs dies.

Jesus is the Good Shepard. He takes care of each one of us. No matter how awful of a situation a person may come from, He will take them in and love them unconditionally. No person is too broken for Jesus. People who have been discarded by others, used and abused, left to die, or been self-destructive with drugs or other things - nobody is too far gone to be saved. All one has to do is believe that He is the one who can and will save them.

When Jesus said, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice", he was referring to the inclusion of Gentiles into his followers. The "fold" represents the Jewish community, the primary audience of Jesus during his earthly ministry. By saying that he has "other sheep,"

Jesus indicates that there are people outside of the Jewish community who will also become his followers. Jesus emphasizes that it is his mission to bring these Gentiles into his fold, to unite them with his Jewish followers under his leadership. He declares that they will listen to his voice, indicating that they will recognize him as their shepherd and respond to his teachings and guidance.

This statement reflects Jesus' inclusive vision of his kingdom, which transcends all boundaries. It highlights his mission to bring salvation to **all** people, regardless of their background, and to unite them as one flock under his care and leadership.

Yes, The Good Shepard died and was resurrected for everybody. We all are sinful and often act like the servant

in today's gospel. We run when things get tough - we get afraid, we have doubts, and we scatter. We hide, we look away, we say, "Sorry God, that's not my it's kind of thing". We find excuses like the song:

I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet, Don't trouble me now... But, even if we run from Jesus, He will continue to pursue us. We are His valuable sheep and He loves each one of us, broken, lost, healthy, happy. It doesn't matter to Him.

Just as a shepherd cares for His flock, Jesus shows unwavering devotion to us, His beloved sheep. He knows each of us intimately, calling us by name and guiding us along the paths of righteousness. Jesus' devotion is not passive but active. He goes to great lengths to protect us from harm, leading us away from danger and providing for our every need. But, we don't always heed His warnings or listen to His voice. And then we stray.

We, like sheep, are vulnerable and oblivious to the dangers around us. Like sheep, we live in a wilderness called our Earthly lives. In these Earthly lives, we have temptations, the desire to put ourselves first, self-indulgence and often little sacrifice for others or for the greater good. We, like sheep, need a Shepherd who is willing and able to protect us from all the harm that we cause ourselves. We need a Shepherd who can not only save us from ourselves, but one who we trust because He knows us.

This world has all kinds of people who want to lead us, but if we are willing to follow those people, we will always be in danger. Following any human, putting someone on such a pedestal that we lose ourselves in the admiration (think of cult leaders, certain religious leaders, politicians), only puts us in further danger. Just as the religious leaders in Jesus' time only cared about their rules

and laws - only cared about the Chosen ones of Israel. They were like the hired hands in today's gospel, running away from anyone who was not like themselves.

But Jesus is the only one who we can trust to lead us to eternal salvation. He accepts ALL of us as members of his flock. He gives us boundaries that will protect us. He gives us spiritual nourishment, rest, refreshment and joy. He gives Himself away by laying down His life for us. He gives himself away to bring us closer to God. He protects us from Satan's attempts to distract us while we are on our Christian walk of life. He gives our lives meaning and purpose. He is good all of the time. He will give us a rich life filled with purpose and true happiness. The eternal life He offers is absolutely wonderful and can never be diminished or taken away from us.

A good shepherd must have love and compassion for his sheep. He must know each sheep and be willing to protect each sheep - not just the strong ones, the most beautiful ones or the ones that can bring him to the most money. The weak, injured or sick sheep are just as worthy of protection as the rest of the flock. A good shepherd will lay down his life for every sheep in his flock. Jesus has all of these characteristics.

Once we accept this Shepherd as the only one who can truly save us, then we must act accordingly. We must help to bring others into the flock. We must help protect others from harm - not just those like us, either. The persecuted, the broken, the forgotten - those are the sheep that Jesus wants us to find and help. The lonely person at the nursing home who would love a visit; the outcast teenager who is being bullied; the homeless person who is hungry; the young, gay person who is contemplating suicide. There

are so many sheep that need help. We need to lead them to the ultimate Shepherd by showing Him to them through our actions. We need to be the love, kindness, and understanding that He will give them. We are called. It is time to answer. It is time to put away our differences and our judgments. It is time to fight for all of the sheep that Jesus loves, not just the ones we already know and love. It is what Jesus expects us to do.

Just like Karen and I being willing to accept dogs that nobody else wanted - the broken, the lame, the beaten, and left for dead - Jesus wants us to be willing to accept all people. We love every one of our dogs, not just the perfect ones - we know their personalities, their broken pasts, and the love that they are still able to share. The broken people out there have love to share as well. Bring them into your fold. If Jesus will, don't you think you can, too?

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, We know that you created every living being in your image. Any person born into this world was born to be one of yours. But society has stripped away so many people's dignity because they are deemed as not worthy. They look differently than us, love differently than us, act differently than us. So, we run away like the hired hand. We shun them and wait to minister to those who we think are good enough. It is time we realize that everyone is good enough. Everyone is called by name. Everyone deserves the love, respect, and grace that only You can provide. Let us never forget that. In the name of our loving, grace-filled Shepherd, Amen.