

## **“The Good Shepherd”**

Easter 4 (Year B): 25 April 2021

Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: John 10:11-18

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“It is the part of a good shepherd to shear his flock, not to skin it” —(Latin proverb).

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Let’s explore God’s promise in Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We center on one of Jesus seven “I am” sayings in John’s Gospel. These are Jesus “*ego ami*” (*eimi*) sayings. They disclose who John thinks Jesus is and does for believers. Hear the Gospel lesson:

**<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 <sup>[a]</sup> 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” (John 10:11-18).**

Jesus speaks every word in this Gospel text. Perhaps you have seen a Bible with Jesus’ words in red. If so, then this text is 100% red. Jesus said: “Let the little children come to me . . . for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14, Luke 18:16). Jesus also said, “Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones . . . will not lose their reward” (Matthew 10:42). As a warning Jesus said, “Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:10). In a society that devalued children, Jesus was a rare child advocate. Jesus believed that helping children protects them, Thus, Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

Shepherds tend and lead sheep. The 23rd Psalm reads “he leadeth me beside the still waters,” and it is true. “Follow the leader,” may be a child’s game, but a lot of teaching occurs playing it. Children learn at least 80% of their behavior by what they see others do, as opposed to listening to what they say. A maxim used against preachers is true of parenting—“I would rather see a sermon any day than hear one.” We remember, “Do not worry about whether or not your children listen to you. Worry about what they see when they watch you.”

We regard children because Jesus regarded children. Of course, not everyone does. When people moan about education taxes, what kinds of doctors, nurses, attorneys, judges, and other professionals we would have if not for a well-educated public? There is self-interest involved in caring for children. This much is true: “We can judge the humanity of a society by how it treats its youngest and its oldest citizens” (various citations). Beyond simply our self-interest and moral duty to protect the weakest, we also remember that our church’s chief duty offers our children an active shield against harm. We offer hope to these little ones: belonging, value, and purpose. We live in a world that lacks a coherent story—but we have the story of God, Christ, and faith. This is our chief tangible gift.

Modern Christians recognize that our children are not going to get a dose of faith from our culture as we did. Our social context now is either disinterested or anti-Christian. Perhaps this is a good thing. For not everything that passes as Christian is worthy of Christ’s name. Once I picked up my daughter from kindergarten. Her teacher and I got into a discussion. When she found out I was a pastor she asked which church. I told her. She said: “My uncle goes there. At first it saddened my family. Then, we decided your church was better than nothing.” I was speechless. Our children’s faith growth obliges the church and parents. Today’s issue is not whether our faith will have children, but whether our children will have faith.

Of course, people abhor child abuse, but we do our children no favors by neglecting teaching self-discipline. Children need to know that although play is important, the value of work and respect of other people has import too. We have a chance to teach children about work, getting along with others, and how to manage things. To not teach them is to leave them spiritually adrift.

A quotation that really stuck with me was from the late 1980s television program “Thirty-Something.” Hope Steadman comments on her husband Michael’s religious doubts: “Don’t be afraid to give your children something that you do not have.” Here are two brief items worth pondering and a longer one: First, the church is one of the few family activities left in our age-segregated culture. We often pay lip service to family values. Attending worship as a family puts meat on otherwise empty bones we call modern life. The church is for everyone from cradle to grave—and beyond!

Second, in the church, generations pass along the faith traditions, stories, and traditions of our parents, grandparents, and the ancestors. Church is an ultimate transmitter of ethical, faith-based, cultural DNA we have amassed as civilized people.

Last, I have a theory about the way we main/old-line churches do Christian education. Children who get a smattering of religious teaching are more vulnerable to bad theology or efforts of cults or other religions than children who receive no religious instruction whatsoever. The reason is that those children who get some of the faith in fits and spurts through Sunday school or VBS know that what the church has is valuable, but they do not get enough of the big picture. Thus, when someone trots out a more or less coherent religious system, they dupe our vaguely Christian educated children—tricked by cult-type personalities or systems of belief. Our world is adrift. Most people do not have a system of belief. So, when anyone comes along, they may too easily influence our children. The church’s Christian education program arms our children with the stories of faith to understand our 2000+ year tradition. Believe me, if our children do not get their training here, someone else will be more than happy to step in to do the job for us. Sadly—we may not like the results!

We today remind ourselves that we be ever vigilant for our unprotected children and be active about it. But we also know that children need more than protection from evil, predatory-type people. They need the value and meaning that good-hearted people can offer them. So, what is good for our children is good for all of us. The good shepherd Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs” (Matthew 19:14). Amen.

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