

Fourth Sunday of Easter 2018

There is a big difference between a shepherd and a hired hand. A shepherd knows his sheep. He knows them by name, he knows their history and he knows their wounds. His hands assist with their births, he picks out burrs and thorns, his hands comfort them in stressful times. His voice calls to them, his eyes watch over them, his feet go after them when they are lost. This is what Jesus means when he says, *"I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; "*

A hired hand does none of these acts of kindness and duty. Paid to watch the sheep, he would be more content snoozing on the side of the hill, perhaps stealing sheep from another to improve his lot, or even picking out which of the sheep the shepherd certainly wouldn't miss and taking them for his own, rather than actually doing that for which he was hired.

The truth comes when trouble hits. When a sheep is lost, the shepherd, searches diligently for his sheep. This is more than just some dumb animal. This is part of his flock. He knows his sheep, he loves his sheep and he will do his utmost to find it. He will search high and low, even into the darkest of nights until he finds and returns this sheep to his flock. And Jesus says *"the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* When danger approaches the shepherd confronts the trouble head on, fighting it tooth and nail, being willing even to sacrifice himself, indeed to die, for the protection of his sheep.

The hired hand, on the other hand, when a sheep is lost, might give a cursory look around, and then return to his duties, chalking up that sheep as one that won't be missed. When danger approaches, the hired hand looks to his own interests, willing to trade his master's sheep for his own safety. This is why Jesus describes the hired hand this way, when he *"sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep."*

For centuries the flock of God, or the religious institutions of the day, had just such hirelings. Whether they were prophets, priests, or kings, many of these hired hands were more concerned with lining their pockets and satisfying their egos, rather than caring for the chosen of God.

So, Jesus, the Good shepherd of the sheep came to them to rescue them. He came to live and dwell among his sheep once again. He came that he might call them by name, enter into their history and bear their wounds. He came that

they might be born again, that he might remove the thorns and burrs which burdened them and that he might comfort them in their fear. Jesus the good shepherd came to seek and save the lost.

Today, as you may have gathered is Good Shepherd Sunday. It is also Earth Day. The shepherds of Jesus' days would have lived in a world which did not suffer from the pollution that we live with today through our exploitation of creation for our own advantage and greed.

Earth Day is an annual event held to promote environmental protection across the world. Its aim is to promote saving the environment through activities like clearing up rubbish, planting new trees as well as calling attention to the importance of recycling and conservation. The origins of Earth Day date back to 1969 when the devastating Santa Barbara oil spill killed more than 10,000 animals along the California coastline and caused catastrophic damage to the region's once-pristine environment.

In response to the disaster, environmental activists began to quickly organize to push for a day dedicated to protecting the environment as well as promoting environmental education and regulation by the government. Peace activist and environmentalist John McConnell first proposed the concept at the 1969 UNESCO conference in San Francisco. McConnell believed that by setting aside a day to recognize environmental issues and enlisting ordinary people in helping to protect the Earth, the world's environment could be better protected and resources better preserved for the future. That is why many thousands of people all around the country have been taking part in beach clean up sessions and as a result of the Sky campaign, we are all very aware of the dangers to the environment caused by plastic bottles and the like.

Oh, my goodness, or words to that effect I hear you say, I never saw Godfrey Hilliard as a tree hugger! You are right, I am not. But I do care about the environment as, I am sure you do as well.

In the days of Jesus, shepherds were considered to be "beyond the pale", so to speak. Because they worked long and unsociable hours they could not go through the proper ritual cleansing that the High Priests demanded. They were regarded as being slightly odd and not fully accepted by the majority in their society.

There are people in our society that think that environmentalists are a bit odd. Why are we so quick to condemn those who feel strongly about issues in our world like the environment?

Those who seek to save our environment are to be commended and those who seek to exploit it for their own profit should be condemned.

The shepherd and the hireling- the environmentalists and the exploiters.

We know who they are. We know where they are and we know that we have choices to make with regard to our own lives and attitudes. Perhaps we need a poet to sum things up:

*The ninety and nine in the fold safely lay
But this one sheep had foolishly gone astray
And as he lay bleating all lost and afraid
The Good Shepherd heard his cry and came to his aid*

*All through the wilderness the Good Shepherd went
To seek and save the lost sheep was His intent
Fierce ravening wolves pursued Him all the way
and the thorns tore His flesh throughout that day.*

*Lesser shepherds and hireling would have fled
But He stood firm and for His sheep He bled
Enduring such suffering in order to save
This poor lost sheep from Hell and the grave*

*He lifted me out of the miry clay
and upon His shoulders I gently lay
Brought me into the security of the pen
right through the vale of death to heaven.*

Amen.