

April 25, 2021 Easter 4B
John 10:11-18
Wool or Mutton

For centuries in the Christian church, for reasons I don't know, the Fourth Sunday of Easter is always Good Shepherd Sunday, and there are always sheep everywhere you look. This year they're especially thick – we hear two of the most familiar and cherished portions of scripture – the 23rd Psalm and the section from John's Gospel where Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd."

I always have to laugh a little bit when these agricultural-based readings come up. I grew up in the city. I never set foot on a farm till I was 25 years old. When I received my first call as pastor, it was to a rural, farming-based church in Princeton, MN. The Gospel lesson for the Sunday I preached my first sermon was the sower and the four types of soil. I had to tell people right up front that I was a city boy preaching to farmers about farming analogy that Jesus used. 25 years later, I am still having to talk about agriculture without knowing a whole lot about it.

Over the centuries, this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and His followers as sheep has been, for whatever reasons, terribly appealing. The amount of stained glass, painting, music and poetry that it has inspired is truly staggering, and the number of sermons, articles, hymns, retreats and meditations devoted to it is doubtless vast beyond measure. So, it's with great trepidation that any preacher wanders into this particular pasture and tackles these particular critters. Because one thing this city boy does know about sheep--you need to watch where you step.

Still, in all the words read and heard on the subject of the Good Shepherd and His sheep, there is one thing about all this that no one talks about. It has to do with the simple question of "Why in the world do shepherds have sheep in the first place?"

Ever thought about that?

Shepherds probably keep sheep for pretty much the same reasons that ranchers keep cows, farmers keep cotton, and the Colonel keeps chickens.

Being a shepherd and taking care of sheep, and being a sheep and having a shepherd, are, sooner or later, going to have something to do with wool and with mutton. There's just no avoiding it. And this little reality never

shows up in the stained-glass windows or in the cutesy paraphrases of the 23rd Psalm on sentimental greeting cards. But keep these two things in mind: wool and mutton.

In a sense, this is rather encouraging. After all, one of the problems with this shepherd-and-sheep business – as popular as it is – is that sheep have a reputation as being passive, stupid, unimaginative, docile and dull. You will never find a sheep in the circus, I was told this week, because they can't be trained to do anything. So if we are the sheep of our Lord's pasture, does that then mean we are supposed to be like sheep: just hanging around, occasionally getting lost, not doing much, looking cute and being taken care of because there is absolutely no way we could survive for 15 minutes on our own? Is the whole point of the story that we aren't worth very much, and that we aren't very capable?

No. Remember, shepherds don't generally keep sheep as pets – they aren't all that much fun to have around. Instead, there are reasons for the whole enterprise, and expectations for all concerned. The sheep are useful, they are important, indeed they are necessary. If the sheep don't produce, the shepherd is flat out of business. Which brings us back to wool and mutton. This is the piece of the Good Shepherd business that is about us; it's about our part of what's going on with this familiar and comfortable talk about green pastures and still waters. The Lord expects things of us, and if we don't come through, well, there are no contingency plans.

We have to be careful here, and keep things straight. The point is not that there's some fine print on Jesus' promise to be the Good Shepherd, or that he's only a good shepherd for the most useful of the sheep. Jesus isn't going to leave us to the wolves or turn us into dog food – or whatever it is you do with worthless sheep – if we don't produce. The Lord cares for us and has blessed us. He has laid down His life for us. That sacrifice, that love, that continued care, these are simply gifts. They are given without condition and without exception. We don't try to do stuff in the hope that God will be nicer to us or love us more. There is no "more."

Nonetheless, there are expectations – there is the business of wool and mutton. The care that the Lord offers us is intended to lead to something, something real and substantial.

We are to produce, to give back, from who we are – from what we can do, from what our situation in life is, from our various skills, abilities, resources and gifts.

We don't grow wool, that's not of our nature. But it is of our nature to worship and to serve; to reach out and to share; to study and to pray; to increase in holiness and to tell the truth; to seek for justice and to be willing to sacrifice. It is of our nature to choose to grow, in a disciplined and steady way, into the fullness of the stature of the person of Christ – and to do this in community, and with integrity. This is expected of us. Now, this isn't about church work – Sunday morning and committee stuff – although that can be part of it. Instead, this is about the work of the church, which is much larger and a whole lot more interesting.

And that costs, it can cost a lot. Once more, remember the wool and the mutton.

At the same time, don't forget that this also means that each and every one of the sheep has purpose and value and worth, and that each is important. Each and every one of us can contribute, and is called to contribute, in one way or another, to the mission of the church. You can't be too young or too old or too new or too sick or too ordinary or too uneducated, or too ornery, or too busy, or too anything to avoid the reality of wool and mutton.

We are needed; and without us, without any single one of us, the mission and work of the Lord and his church are impoverished. We matter, and things are expected of us. We aren't pets, kept for our owner's amusement. We are valuable assets.

John penned our Gospel lesson today. In it, he quoted Jesus five times using the phrase "I lay down my life." This same John also wrote the letter that we read as our Epistle reading. Listen again to what he sees as a natural extension of Jesus laying down His life, a natural extension of the Gospel:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1 John 3:16-18)

One of the many truths of the biblical story that our culture is eager to forget is that there is no such thing as being chosen for privilege. We are not chosen, picked out, protected by our Good Shepherd for the sake of our own comfort, convenience, personal needs or ease of life. Nobody in the Bible is chosen for this sort of stuff. Instead, God's care and protection are always given that we might be better equipped for service. It always means that something special, something more, is expected. To be sure, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, he pays the price, and protects us and cares for us. That's the way it is. But there is more to it than this. We are valuable, and important; and we have an essential role to play in all of this. There is the business of wool, and of mutton.