

¹¹"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.¹²The 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.¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me,¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep.¹⁶I 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.¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.¹⁸No 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."

Today's passage begins with Jesus saying that he is the good shepherd. The good shepherd. Not just any kind of shepherd but a good one. What is good? Good is when the shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep. When is the last time you offered to lay down your life for something? When was it? When was the last time you decided that what was at stake was more important than your life, that you could lay down your life in order for something else to live? This is what's at stake today in the text we have before us.

There are other kinds of shepherds. A hired hand shepherd who doesn't own his position, his role as shepherd, he only sees himself as a no-risk shepherd. One who will do the work when it is convenient or easy but flees at any sign of risk. This kind of shepherd sees the wolf approaching to eat the sheep, and runs. The good shepherd puts himself between the sheep and the wolf protecting his sheep at all costs, even upon personal injury.

In the UCC we have a saying that in order to belong, you don't have to be a sheep. Sheep are not the smartest of animals and don't pay attention to any of their surroundings, so are constantly wandering off because they are too busy eating grass with their heads to the ground. So they need a good Shepherd. We've all seen the paintings of the white Jesus standing smiling in the midst of his flock of sheep. Most of us, we don't want to be sheep. I think this passage is actually challenging us today, not to be sheep, but to be careful, intentional, focused on who your Jesus is and who is shepherding you through this life.

We are filled in this country with anxiety. Time magazine conducted a \$15 million poll with the National Institute of Health over a six-year period. They recently reported that the No. 1 problem in America is anxiety. More than 13 million Americans are afflicted by it, and anxiety, not drugs, is the No. 1

cause of suicide in America. There is one suicide every two minutes in the United States, and the largest age group is between 15 and 24. We are anxious and that anxiety leads us to look for a shepherd, to look for someone or some way to get over our anxiety.

The messages we hear on TV build and reinforce a philosophy of loss. That if we could just do X: take their pill, wear those shoes, cook that dinner, have this degree we would be happy, fulfilled and successful. If we don't we lose. And this creates a never ending cycle of accumulating stuff to fill that void that is within us, to settle that anxiety that is always lurking below the surface. It makes us idolators...we begin to worship stuff, we begin to give the power of God to advertising and consuming instead of to God.

Today's Scripture meets us right in this place. No wonder you do not trust, Jesus calls from behind the flock. You have put all your dollars into the hired hand and not the shepherd. That pill, that outfit, that educational plan they will all yellow with the passage of time to only be replaced by the latest gimmick. You can put as much money, time, effort, focus on those things and all you will end up with is lacking trust in self, in others, in the world. It is time to see the wolf and the one who allows the wolf to attack for what they are. It is time to work at trust in order to repair our relationship with the shepherd. It is time to take responsibility for scattering the flock and our participation in that. It is time to hear the call of the shepherd.

Shepherds are not perfect people. They live out beyond the city limits. They bathe infrequently, because they live with their herd. But, they can distinguish each bleat and who it belongs to. They can sense when a predator is on hand. They know when a sheep is missing and they are willing to go off and find it and bring it back to the herd. They carry the lame. They bandage the hurt. They care for the flock and the earth by moving the flock along. Shepherds know their task but are rough around the edges. They do this work as a life style. Like farming there are no days off. Every day is a work day.

Jesus is associated with the Good Shepherd, where each day he worked at living more into who God created him to be. He used his mind to care for God's people, and interpreted that through his every day actions, his words, his life. He was willing time and again to lay down his life and pick up a new one. He at times thought that race, nationality, gender prevented some from being a part of this flock. And each time, God opened his eyes to the many kinds of flocks that can hear God's call and how each in their own unique ways are gathered to the shepherd. Each time Jesus had to set down his own understanding of himself and the world, allowing something to die in order for something new to live within himself and the world.

We too are asked to do this out of today's passage. We are asked to put down our anxiety. We are asked to listen for the comforting words of the Good Shepherd Jesus where love is the number one measure. To accept the love of God. To invite the love of God. To share the love of God. And, this is a command, a command that God gives to us. When we choose to worship anxiety and allow the hired hand to lure us away into false senses of security we are worshipping idols.

We are commanded this day, to love. We are commanded this day to love in the image of the Good Shepherd who went all in. Who was not taking on a temporary position, but was willing to put his life on the line for this love. Was willing at all costs day or night, good times or bad to be the love that God provides to each one of us. That even when he chose to lie down his life, he did it, he laid it down, because of the love of God not the hate of people, not the hate of institutions, not the hate of executions, he laid out his life completely for the love of God.

This is risky. It always seems so easy when we are talking about love. But, I have to admit this is risky. It is risky because it's not how our world operates. We are asked to trust in the quick fix, in the immediate gratification of this world. We are asked to trust in the shiney, the beautiful, the rich. The Good Shepherd instead offers to us the dirty, the outsider, the rough edges, the slow. The Good Shepherd calls us to completely re-orient our goals and desires, to only consider God and what God's love is and can do. To pick up that love and put it on as a life style, a lifestyle that will still bring us into contact with predators and those who will want to send us packing. And sometimes those predators will leave holes and scars. And yet, this Good Shepherd beckons us to touch his scars, to see them, acknowledge them and to leave that death behind and pick up life again, life that is filled with love. Deep abiding love that can sustain and deepen even in the midst of predators and false hopes. It is a risk to offer to put one's life down, and it is amazing to put down the dead parts of oneself and pick up the living.

We are a suffering flock. We have scattered the sheep of this fold in many ways over the past days, years, and decades. When is it we will be prepared to stop worshipping the hired hands and begin to go all in with the Good Shepherd. The love of God is abiding, the love of God is sustaining, and the love of God brings peace. May we lay down our anxiety and pick up instead the love of God and the presence of the Good Shepherd. Even when fog comes, we will still have the Presence of Peace to guide our steps which will sustain us until the fog clears. This is our moment of truth...Which shepherd, which voice, which call do we follow. I pray it is the call of a loving God, the witness of the Good Shepherd. I pray it may be so.

