



Easter 4-April 25, 2021
Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish
Psalm 23, John 10:11-18

“No Fences”

Dear friends in Christ, Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For the past three Sundays in Easter, we have been hearing how Jesus was making appearances to people after his resurrection from the dead. This week, Jesus again appears, but this appearance happens before his death and resurrection. Jesus is predicting his death and resurrection by telling the parable of the good shepherd and how the good shepherd who owns the flock will lay down his life (will die) and take it up again (will rise from the dead).

This fourth Sunday after Easter is always lifted up in our churches as Good Shepherd Sunday. Today we again have recited one of the most familiar and comforting passages throughout all of scripture. The 23rd Psalm. When you know that the good shepherd is Jesus Christ, the words from the gospel from John are also comforting. However, the first time Jesus spoke these words, they did not comfort those who were listening. This is often what happens when Jesus tells a parable and people wonder where they fit in the story.

Before Jesus spoke these words, Jesus had just healed a blind man on the sabbath day, and the religious leader had gotten wind that Jesus was not following the rules of the sabbath. These religious leaders had just interrogated Jesus and told him that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to those who worship him and those who obey his will. They believed followers of Jesus stayed within the boundaries of the law or the fences. But Jesus' power to open the eyes of a man who had been blind from birth baffled them. They wondered “How could this man not be from God?” if he did this miraculous healing, but they also believed that a man from God would follow the commandments and would not have healed on the sabbath. If this man was blind from birth, why didn't Jesus wait until the sabbath was over and stay within the boundaries of what the law spelled out for working on the sabbath. Jesus was teaching them that a good shepherd works by showing mercy to those who others feel are outside the flock. This is great news for the wandering sheep but troubled the minds of the religious leaders.

These religious leaders, the Pharisees, then told Jesus, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” This is when Jesus tells them the parable of the good shepherd and confirms their blindness. This parable should be comforting and clear for you since you know that you are wandering sheep. But it wasn't for these Pharisees. Their blindness or more accurately, their deafness to what Jesus was teaching left them wondering who they were in this parable. They likely hoped they weren't sheep or wolves. Sheep were defenseless and wolves were evil.

Jesus said that he was the good shepherd. That left them to be the hired hands in the story. Were they hired hands? But it didn't sound like it would be good to be hired hands either. Jesus said that hired hands scattered as fast as the sheep do when danger arrives. They had just told Jesus that good sheep. behaved well by obeying the will of their master and listened to them.

*Jesus however doesn't mention anything about **good** sheep in this parable. The only thing that Jesus said that is good in this parable is the shepherd and there is only one of them. The religious leaders wanted this parable to be about what made sheep good or what made a good, hired hand. This was their calling in life. They were good at laying down the law, but the idea of laying down their lives for the sake of defenseless sheep was troubling to them.*

The good shepherd in this parable does not sort through the flock of sheep and decide which ones are his based on how well they are respecting the boundaries of the fence. This is how a hired hand works. They are willing to care for the sheep that seem to behave. But when a wolf arrives and a sheep chooses to wander off, then so be it. Bad sheep make bad choices, and they will have to live or rather die from their bad decisions.

There isn't anything about good fences in this parable either. If the sheep are not staying within boundaries that you gave or made for them, then maybe you just need to improve the fence or give better rules for the sheep to follow. But for those of you who have been around sheep much at all know, sheep do not respect boundaries very well. It is a sheep's nature to work on the boundaries of fences long enough until they are on the other side of the fence and when they are successful at breaking through the fence, they are lost.

Jesus the good shepherd is not a fence builder. Jesus doesn't use a fence or the commandments to keep them close to him. Instead, Jesus protects his sheep with his voice. His words. And when there is a sheep who has attempted to become a member of the flock by good behavior, Jesus reminds them that they are sheep. The prophet Isaiah uses the sheep image as well and declares "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the sins of us all."

*Isaiah didn't look at sheep and say **some** of us are like sheep. No, he declared all of us are like sheep who have turned to our own way. And since we are sheep, what is the solution for our sheepish behavior. The Lord takes our sin and replaces it with his righteousness. This is what the good shepherd did on Good Friday-he laid down his life. On Easter-he took it up again.*

In the parable of the good shepherd, there are no fences. There are no fences that can prevent Jesus from finding you and bringing you safely back to his flock. There are no fences that you can build to keep you from Jesus from giving his unconditional mercy to you. There are no fences that can protect you when danger or trouble comes in your life like Jesus does when you hear his voice. You are sheep. Jesus is the good shepherd. Jesus speaks again to you today, reminding you of the words he spoke to you in your baptism, "You are mine." Amen