

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/26/2015, The Fourth Sunday of Easter
John 10:11-18
Being a Good Sheep

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹I am the good shepherd [says Jesus]. The good shepherd *lays down his life* for the sheep. (John 10:11, RSV)

Some of the great turning points and resolutions in life are entered into quietly. No one else in the world might hear the pledge we whisper to ourselves, and yet that pledge is awfully important to us. We mean for it to govern the rest of our lives.

So it was for me when our sons were born. I looked at Carol, and I looked at our newborn sons, first Sam and then David a couple years later, and I whispered to myself that I meant to be a good man for sake of my family. I have quietly renewed that pledge many times as I have gazed upon my little family. Why, the boys are grown men now, but often when I see them or think of them, or when I simply see Carol asleep on the pillow next to me, my heart still skips a beat and I think to myself, I want to be a good man in this world for the sake of my family. An important resolution, quietly spoken to myself.

There are other quiet resolutions that can govern a person's life. Perhaps a soldier has been spared death when the odds were overwhelmingly against him. He tells no one, but he thinks to himself, "The good Lord has given me a second chance in life, and I mean to live a good life henceforth." Likewise, for someone who has survived surgery or an accident or is recovering from some fierce addiction. Or perhaps you have met one who has captured your heart or your spirit — maybe a new friend or a teacher — and you say to yourself, "I have been blessed to know this person and to count him, count her, my friend. I mean to live a good life for his sake, for her sake."

The moving thing about this morning's Gospel Lesson is that we are permitted to listen in on the quiet resolution Jesus makes. It is a resolution that will govern the remainder of his young life:

¹¹I am the good shepherd [he Jesus]. The good shepherd *lays down his life* for the sheep. (John 10:11, RSV)

Jesus knows what is coming. This is Chapter 10 in St. John's Gospel. By Chapter, he will be dead.

About our Good Shepherd, we need have no doubts. In today's Lesson he said that he would lay down his life for the sheep, and he did it! He spoke, and he performed the deed. He spoke the words that expressed his love, and he lived the

rest of his life according to those words. It was as if he were a young father gazing at his newborn child and resolving to lay down his life for the welfare of that child, except that in his case, he meant the whole world. He gazed around upon humanity. His gaze reached all the way to you and me here in our church, and he quietly said to himself, “They are threatened by wolf and lion, but I will not abandon them. I will not run away. I will lay down my life for them.”

Again, about our Good Shepherd, we need have no doubts. The question is not about him, but rather about ourselves.

If you should like a title for this sermon, I call it “Being a Good Sheep.” It is an appeal to us to be humble people, quietly willing to follow wheresoever our Good Shepherd would lead us.

Richard John Neuhaus

Let me begin with a story from the recent biography¹ of Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, of blessed memory. Many of us knew him. He was a giant, from an age of giants, from a time when the Lutheran Church could attract some of the greatest minds of America into the ranks of its clergy. Richard John Neuhaus certainly had one of those great minds and great spirits. But this story is not so much about him, but about his friend Tyler, back when they were teenagers in Cisco, Texas. Tyler tried to be a good sheep of our Lord Jesus. He lived with a kind of fearlessness because, in the simplicity of his faith, he simply took Jesus at his word.

Tyler was a bit slow. In those days, they would have called him “retarded.” That did not matter to Neuhaus, because Tyler had another feature that impressed Neuhaus a lot. “There was a wondrous calm about him,” Neuhaus wrote, “as though he had a secret world where he really lived.”

Also, Tyler was fearless. Years later Neuhaus wrote this little story about Tyler:

One hot day some of us were swimming in a rural tank, which is what Texans call a man-made pond for watering cattle. The rest of us were impressed by, indeed envious of, Tyler’s fearlessness in diving from a huge rock into what must have been no more than five feet of water. He was unruffled and told us—not bragging, but with smiling ingenuousness stating the obvious—“I’m under the shadow.”²

That’s from Psalm 91. This simple Baptist boy was quoting from the Bible:

¹ Boyagoda, Randy, Richard John Neuhaus: A Life in the Public Square. The Crown Publishing Group. 2015. Kindle Edition.

² Ibid. pages 53-55.

¹He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide *under the shadow* of the Almighty.

⁴He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust... (from Psalm 91, KJV)

“I’m under the shadow,” Tyler had said. Of course he should *not* have jumped off that rock into such shallow water. In that, Tyler was confused. But Tyler was not confused in his simple faith that he lived “under the shadow.” He lived under the shadow of God’s wings. So do you, and so do I! The question is whether we can take the leap into whatever pond Jesus lays before us. Can we be a good sheep of the Good Shepherd?

In the hands of doctors

We all have experience, I bet, of placing ourselves in the hands of doctors or other counselors. Important matters are afoot in our lives – matters of health or finances or relationships or legal circumstances. Let me commend to you, then, this little prayer for the waiting room:

Lord, make this doctor to be a good shepherd, and then make me a good sheep. Give me grace to listen and to understand, and give me courage to take the plunge. Keep me under the shadow of your wings.

I tried to live that way a couple years ago when my cardiologist looked up from her reports and said, “You need open-heart surgery.” I simply said, “Okay, let’s do it.” And I entered the hospital the next day.

The idea here is that our God has many kinds of angels in this world, including doctors, attorneys, financial consultants, real estate brokers, psychologists, social workers, pastors, and so on. Often the question is not whether we have a good shepherd, but rather, are we being good sheep.

The Good Shepherd

However that might be, when it comes to the Good Shepherd of our souls, we can never be wrong in trying to be good sheep. In a fallible world, of course we can worry whether our earthly doctors and counselors are right. But when it comes to Jesus, let us have no doubts. Like Neuhaus’s friend Tyler, let us say to ourselves, “I am under the shadow,” and take the plunge.

This is our highest blessing in life: that we are not shepherdless in this old world, but have the Good Shepherd to lead us. In the end, nothing else is better than this. Nothing else matters more. Not even peace and unity within the flock matter more, because, after all, a peaceful and united flock can fall right off the cliff. They will not fall off a cliff if they follow their Good Shepherd, for he will

surely guide them to green pastures by still waters. But without our Good Shepherd, we can peacefully stray and wander and end up in disaster. That is the nature of sheep. We are capable of being wrong about things. But we will be wrong about nothing important in life if we follow Jesus.

And to be honest, to follow Jesus is sometimes like being Tyler up there on the rock, preparing to jump into dangerous waters. We cannot see as clearly as we might want. There might be a hurricane of voices urging us in different directions. All the king's horses and all the king's men, all the world's wisdom and every newspaper in sight might urge us to depart from the ways of Jesus as we have learned those ways in the Bible and in the traditional teaching of the church. Let it be so. Still, let us take the plunge. It is better to stick with our Good Shepherd than to launch out on our own, even if crowds of folks are doing so.

Who knows the temptations you will face this week? The voices bidding you to depart from your Good Shepherd might be strong and beguiling. Everyone else might be doing it. You might be considered an old stick-in-the-mud if you do not go along with the crowd. There might be good people urging you to do it. There might even be an angel bidding you to forsake your Good Shepherd in this issue, for this time in your life. The money could be helpful, the pleasure could be welcome, the good standing in the eyes of others could be useful, and on and on. But let us be humble people this week, quietly following Jesus. This is how we will be truly relevant to the world. Let us be like Tyler taking the plunge, perhaps a bit slow-minded, but willing to trust that we are living under the shadow. Altogether, let us resolve to be good sheep of our Good Shepherd, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.