

“I Am the Good Shepherd “ John 10: 11-15

In Jesus' time, shepherds were everywhere. A shepherd's main duty was to protect his sheep. However, when his sheep were attacked by a pack of wolves, an ordinary shepherd would run away, leaving his flock at the mercy of the menacing attackers.

But the good shepherd was different. Listen to Jesus' words. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He protects his flock even at the cost of his own life. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd.”

Now who were the sheep for Jesus? They were the sick whom Jesus healed, the blind whose sight he restored, the mentally ill whom he liberated, and the marginalized whom he empowered.

Who were the wolves? The wolves were those who hindered Jesus' ministry. They were the scribes and the Pharisees who looked down upon the marginalized, who regarded the poor and oppressed as cursed by God.

Now here is an important question. What are we? Are we the sheep or are we the wolves? The correct answer may be that we are both. Let me explain.

A few weeks ago, the New York Times reported a very sad and heart-breaking story. A four-year old girl was found dead at home in the Bronx. She weighed only 18 pounds. Her mother, mother's boyfriend, and grandmother are being held responsible for her death. She had been poorly fed, and, in the final week, she had been tied to her bed. Eventually, the child died. The cause of death was starvation.

The girl's mother, the boyfriend, and the grandmother are poor and marginalized people in the city of New York. In that sense, they are the sheep that Jesus spoke of.

But from the perspective of the four-year old, they are victimizers. They were horrendously cruel. In other words they are sheep and wolves, victims and victimizers at the same time.

This case, though extreme, illustrates our common situation.

One day we may be on the receiving end of unfair criticism. But another day we may dish out harsh and unfair criticism against those with whom we disagree. We vehemently protest unkind words hurled at us, but we do the same to others whom we dislike. We are sheep and wolves, victims and victimizers.

How does Jesus the good shepherd love us who are sheep one day and wolves another day? He loves us by giving us what we need.

When we are victimizers, Jesus reveals to us in no uncertain terms that we are callous and cold and need to change our ways. Jesus' love for us victimizers has an element of stringency, discipline, and rigor so that we may repent. That is what we need.

That was why Jesus called the scribes and the Pharisees, “You hypocrites.” They needed to be told who they were in order for them to repent. Jesus gave them what they needed.

But when we are victims, Jesus the good shepherd is infinitely gentle and full of mercy and compassion, because that is what we need. That is why Jesus was so gentle and so compassionate to all the despised of the land.

Jesus loves us whether we are sheep or wolves. He gives us what we need. His love never excludes anyone.

So rest assured that Jesus the good shepherd is gently embracing that four-year old girl into eternal life. That is what she needs.

He also loves her mother, her mother's boyfriend, and her grandmother. He is speaking to their consciences and persuading them to repent and change their ways. That, too, is love. Jesus gives them what they need.

Jesus the good shepherd loves us all, sheep and wolves, victims and victimizers alike.

That is good news, good news, indeed.

Thanks be to God.