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Sermon 4/21/2024
John 10:11-18

The Good Hired Hand

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

One thing I've learned in seminary is that it's important for a person who is interpreting the Bible to be very clear about their social location. So let me tell you about myself. I was raised in rural Indiana, on 5 1/2 acres. We were not farmers, in the modern large scale for profit sense, but more like homesteaders. We raised beef cows and had a large garden that

provided food for the family. After college I worked for a large big box retailer for about seven years. During that time, I barely made more than the cost of daycare. My spouse and I were living paycheck to paycheck for several years. Then I worked as a customer service representative for an insurance agency for about fifteen years. I managed a five million dollar book of business, which means that the owner of the company is a millionaire. While I was better off than I had been previously, we were barely able to pay off our debts and slowly backed away from the edge of financial desperation. Last summer, between my first year of seminary and this year, in addition to taking a summer class; I was working two jobs to try to refill the coffers. I was selling my blood plasma, and working part time once again in retail and I was making less per hour than I had when I worked in retail some fifteen years ago. I say all of that - to say I've spent my whole life as a hired hand. I've never had ownership in any of the companies I worked for. It didn't matter how hard I worked, or whether I busted my backside or not, I still make the same wage. During my most recent stint in retail, I started using the phrase "work your wage". If you're on any kind of social media, you've probably heard of quiet quitting. For anyone unfamiliar, that basically means just doing the bare minimum of your job description. People are no longer willing to go above and beyond,

put in extra effort or extra hours. I think this is because they've realized that no matter how hard they work, their name is never going to be on the outside of the building. The hired workers have no ownership.

In the parable of the good shepherd, we're told the hired hand has no ownership in the sheep. I'm going to take a play from the Amy-Jill Levine playbook, in her books and commentaries about parables she advises that we leave the allegory out of it for a minute. Let's talk about the shepherd and the hired hand as described in the text, as if we were talking about a real shepherd and a real hired hand. You've probably guessed by now, that I identify with the hired hand in this story. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf and runs away. The hired hand does not care for the sheep. I think this is setting up a false dichotomy between the **good** shepherd and the *bad* hired hand. If the hired hand does not own the sheep, then maybe it's asking too much to lay down their life? The shepherd presumably has a greater duty to protect the sheep. Now, we don't have the exact contract or job descriptions, none of the commentaries contain the exact requirements of the hired hand. What exactly were they expected to do? One commentary does say that the hired hand would pay a penalty if the sheep were killed. But does the owner of the flock provide life insurance for the hired hand, will their family

be provided for if they die defending the flock? I'm assuming the penalty would be worth it to save their own life. The hired hand decided to work their wage. They're not going to risk their own life to save a sheep. Does the hired hand get a portion of the wool, or a cut of the slaughtered sheep? In the end, the value of the sheep is its wool, and ultimately its slaughter. Shepherds in the real world have no altruistic concern for the sheep themselves, the shepherd's concern is for the economic value of the sheep. In the parable, no one is concerned for the safety of the hired hand, they have to look out for themselves. How can we make the workplace more just for the workers? The challenge in the material world is to ensure the hired hand is earning a living wage, and safety protections are in place that protect the workers from harm. And we don't demonize workers who work their wage.

Now we get to the allegory. This text is direct speech attributed to Jesus. Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd, who lays down his life for his flock. In verses seventeen and eighteen, Jesus reveals that he has the power to lay down his life, and the power to take it up again. This story in the gospel of John takes place prior to the crucifixion and resurrection, but we already know how this story ends. Jesus is risen! Christ is risen! The good news of the Easter story is that Jesus has the

power to take up his life again. Jesus lays down his life for the flock **because** he can take it up again. The good news is that none of us are the shepherd. I don't know who needs to hear this, but you are not, and cannot be anyone's personal savior. You are no one's personal savior. The pastors are not the savior, the church is not the savior. Only Jesus can do that. When the hired hand runs away, the good shepherd remains steadfast. So where do we find ourselves in the story?

The hired hand? The text says the hired hand does not care for the sheep, so maybe this text reminds us that we are called to care for the flock. Not lay down our lives, that is asking too much. But we are called to feed the hungry, house the homeless, care for the poor.

Are we the sheep? If you look carefully at the text the sheep are most often the passive objects of the sentence. Mostly they are just mindless, passive objects at the mercy of the hired hand to protect them, vulnerable to attack from the wolves. The only active verbs attributed to the sheep are to know the shepherd and listen to his voice. Maybe this passage reminds us of our relationship to Jesus, we are called to know Jesus and listen to his voice.

Are we the wolves? Well I hope not, but let's be honest with ourselves. Every week, we collectively call ourselves to confess the ways in

which we participate in systems that cause harm, ways in which we attack and scatter the sheep. Maybe this parable reminds us that sometimes we are the wolf.

We're not entirely bad, we're not wholly good either. The false opposites of good and bad are misleading. Don't fall for the false binary. There's no reason to vilify the hired hand, they are not the bad guy for working their wage. Jesus is the good shepherd and we rejoice, but we are called to be more than just passive members of the flock. We are also called to confess times when we do harm to the flock, we are called to care for the flock. We are not hired hands, we are disciples of Christ, called into the world to care for the poor and marginalized. May it be so.