

Sermon Text: John 10:11-18

I’ve mentioned a few times in the past few weeks, my uncle Archie, who just turned 86. He was in the army from the time he was 16 years old. He was in World War II in Iraq. He was in North Africa part of the time, then he was in Korea, then after that, he instructed at a military college in Tennessee, and it sort of got in his bones. He does not walk. He marches. He understands chain of command. When my aunt was alive, he always said, “Yes, Chief!” On a good day, he said, “Yes, Chiefy.” That was about as informal as he got. He understood chain of command. In fact, my wife, Caroline, says that life would be better if I did.

In faith, ultimately, Jesus is my shepherd. Now that makes me a sheep, a sheep. Now, we don’t like being called sheep. Sheep don’t have a great reputation. They are always led. I have read that if you try to drive sheep the way you drive cattle, they will just run around and get behind you. You can’t drive them. They just run around and get behind. They insist on being led. We don’t like to be called sheep.

I’ll tell you a story. Once, a woman was driving around a hairpin turn up in the mountains on a narrow, country road, and she slung wide right around the outside of the turn, and she forced a man, coming in the opposite direction, to swerve sharply. It was summer. Their windows were down. As they passed, the woman shouted out, “Pig!” The man got mad! He thought, “The nerve! Run me off the road and call me names!” So he looked back over his shoulder, and he said, “Jackass!” As he looked back round the curve and was driving, he crashed into the biggest pig he had ever seen!

We are sheep whether or not we like being called names such as sheep. Now many a religious con man or con woman has taken advantage of our God-given spiritual hunger and our human-herd mentality, and led folks off into outrageous belief after outrageous belief and to financial ruin and even into death. It has been, some of you will remember, nine years since the Hale Bop comet incident. Do you remember that? You think that you could never get sucked into a cult or some sort of a para-Christian sect, but so did these middle class professionals. Upper middle class professionals with Master’s degrees killed themselves nine years ago seeking passage on a UFO they believed was following in the tail of the Hale Bop comet. There are other stories just like it. Our confidence that we, that we, could never be led astray is our weakness. Our confidence that we are more observant and smarter and better informed is our downfall. Our faith in ourselves can do us in.

Jesus warns that we need a shepherd, and He proclaims that He is the Good Shepherd. It is not faith in ourselves that saves us. It is our faith in God in Christ, the Good Shepherd. You know children like to play the game, Follow the Leader. I’m afraid that happens among adults, too. I was reminded of an odd statistical fact, it may be a statistical anomaly, but it is a fact, while I was attending the mental health dinner Thursday night, to which Neal Asman invited me, and I had to go because I didn’t want to give the public statement that I was against mental health so I went to the banquet. There is an odd fact.

For whatever reason, when a community opens and advertises on billboards a suicide prevention hotline, do you know what happens? The number of suicides goes up. This is just a statistical fact. One theory is the more we speak unspeakable things or the more we think unthinkable thoughts, the more they become real options in people’s lives, the more they happen. That’s one theory. I’m not certain. The game, Follow the Leader, is more than just a children’s game. We are sheep, and when prominent, newsworthy people do something, whatever that something is, even when it is suicide, some people will follow.

Does anyone know what the term payola means? You don’t have to say anything, but do you know what payola means? Some of you? Okay, a few people know what payola means. It’s an illegal practice, and I don’t know that it’s done anymore, but years ago, you’d get a popular DJ to give air time, that is to play multiple times on the radio a brand new artist or a brand new recording so that the public would start to think, “Well, that must be popular, and I want to be popular, so I’ll buy that recording.” Payola was done because it works. In the same way, companies now pay movie producers to have fictional characters use real products in movies because it works. It plants in our brains that if we, too, want to be cool like that fictional character, we will use that real product. Our world constantly sends the message that fashionable do this or smart people do this or pretty people use this or informed people believe that. We are sheep more than we like to think.

Even our deeply-held beliefs are shaped, to a large degree, by to whom we listen. To whom do we listen? What words and phrases are out there that are meant to influence our opinions? I saw a new word last week, a word that is meant to influence our opinions. You must listen very carefully and not misquote me, or you will think I’m saying something I’m not. This new word is Islamophobia. It sounds bad! It sounds like psychological condition. It implies an unreasonable fear of Islam. I started thinking if I lived in Israel, and the elected president of Iran said publicly and frequently that because of his understanding of his Islamic faith, he intended to use nuclear weapons to wipe Israel off the map, is that an unreasonable fear? In case you wonder, my source for that threat is the BBC. “Iran’s president has called for Israel to be wiped off the map.” That’s not an unreasonable fear.

The Da Vinci Code is certainly meant to influence uninformed people, who don’t know about early church history or the formation of the New Testament canon. We may have a course on that. I struggled through the study of all these things; agnosticism and the Gospels that came, so far Gospels late, 200 years late, that they’re dragging up and claiming authority for. I never thought anybody in the world would be interested in these things, and here we are with a movie. Some claim the Church has been hiding these things. No, we haven’t. They just aren’t that important. It will influence some people, this movie, because we are sheep.

We all follow some voice or another, some fashionable phrase or work of fiction does inform our opinions. What shepherd do we follow? There are so many voices. Is there anybody here old enough to remember the Elvis album that said on the front cover,

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“50,000,000 Elvis fans can’t be wrong?” Anybody remember that? I’m old enough to remember that. Oh come on, there must be a few more. Is that how we judge truth and trustworthiness, numbers? If 50,000,000 people believe anything, must it be true? Not all beliefs, even if popular, are good. Not all voices are worthy of following, and not all paths have the same destination. I have seen, and you have, too, the old black and white films, the horrifying films of thousands and thousands of people in Nazi Germany, frenzied followers, saluting and praising Adolph Hitler. Popularity does not equal truth or trustworthiness. There are many faiths. How is Jesus the Good Shepherd? Well, I started thinking of this. His message was unique in an important way. Other faiths prescribe and proscribe certain teachings and certain knowledge and certain rituals and duties and holy actions and holy places as stepping-stones to get to God. Jesus’ message was nothing like that! Jesus’ message is that God has come to us. Jesus is unique in that His message proclaims your salvation is complete and bought and paid for. Accept it! Have faith in the God who has done this for you. Live out a life of love and hope that can never be taken away because of what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ. Live out that faith and accept it. That’s all that’s required.

There are no required Scriptures that must be memorized or holy places or rituals or duties or acts that you must do to earn God’s love and grace, in fact, Jesus’ teaching is that you could not earn it if you tried. It is a gift! Using the same shepherd and sheep language in Luke 12, verse 32, Jesus says, “Fear not, little flock.” He calls us a flock. “Fear not, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” It is a gift. Merely accept it. Rejoice in it and love others as I have loved you. I will empower you to be able to love others as I have loved you so just shhh little sheep, listen to my voice. I have given myself for you. It is done. It is done. Accept your acceptance. Salvation is not something we achieve. It is something we receive. It is something we accept. It is done for us in Christ. That is the good news!

There was a Varner poll not long ago that said 56% of people in America say a good person can earn their way into Heaven, but 100% of the New Testament says that life and love and forgiveness and life eternal are all gifts, gifts from God. You can’t earn a gift. You can just accept it or reject it, but you cannot earn it. I’d suggest that we accept it and enjoy it and share it with others. That is the Christian life. So follow the trustworthy shepherd who has nothing to gain, and as the Scripture here says, is not a hireling gaining from His influence over others. Jesus has only to give and we to gain from following Him as our shepherd through this life and unto the next life.

As the philosopher and mathematician, Pascal, once wrote, he said, “You lose nothing by following Jesus Christ. You have only to gain.” He reasoned it this way, philosophically, he said, “If all that Jesus said is true then you follow Him from this life into life eternal, and you win, but even if nothing He said is true, then by following Jesus you live as one forgiven and forgiving, as one loved and loving, you still win by living the best possible life while walking this earth.” “There is no way to lose,” says the philosopher Pascal, “by following Jesus as your shepherd.”

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Who tells you or tries to tell you what to believe? Whom do you allow to influence you? Who defines your reality, your sense of right or wrong, or have you listened to those who smirk and say there are no such things as right and wrong? We move through this world, and we interact with others, and we spend our time and money based on some set of assumptions.

As your minister, I want to say, and I hope it is safe for me to assume that you are here today because you are followers of Jesus Christ, and that you do seek the guidance and the teachings of Jesus Christ when you make decisions that make up direction in your life. I assume, and I hope it is safe for me to assume, that you pray and you struggle about your decisions and your priorities. I assume that you guard yourself against fad and fashion and spoon-fed ideas from others, even if it comes from the pulpit. Even if it comes from the pulpit, you should test it against Scripture and prayer for the spirit of discernment, to see if it fits or if it conflicts with the word of God. Where is the place of the Good Shepherd, Jesus, in your life is my question. How prominent is His leadership? How deeply do we live out the joy of knowing He has done for us what needs to be done to restore relationship, to have our sins forgiven, and to open the door to eternal life? That is joy, and that is a joy we should live out, knowing that we're already as loved as we can be by God, as forgiven as we can be by God.

Because of what has been accomplished for us in Jesus Christ, we have this deep joy that ought to show. Do we live like we know it? Do we show it to friend and to enemy and to family alike? It can be the most difficult thing to live out your faith before family. It can. The crux of what it looks like to follow Jesus as shepherd is trust. When we trust God more than the passing fancies of the crowd, our whole life is calmer. It is more peaceful. The further we follow, the stranger the world may think we are, but so they thought about Jesus as He walked the earth as well. It is good to be strange like Jesus, and rest in the arms of trust. Much better than to be tossed to and for, wondering what all the cool kids will be believing next. When we focus and follow Jesus as our shepherd, we may well go and we may well grow in entirely different directions.

God's growing kingdom grows when we follow Jesus further down that narrow path, as He described it. It grows when we follow. It grows when others see us follow. It grows when we turn down the volume of the other voices, and listen intently for that still, small voice of God to see where is God calling me next. Where is God calling me next? The Good Shepherd. Let us follow Him. Amen.