

(Psalms 23 KJV)

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. ³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. ⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. ⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. ⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

(John 10:11-18 NRSV)

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."

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One Community of God's People

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
Massachusetts

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Text: John 10:11-18

My mother was a southerner. She also had a million sayings, many southern in their nature.

"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all." I suspect we've all heard that one before, but as a southerner, she really meant it. I don't think my mother ever got used to what she perceived as the incredible rudeness of the north. She was amazed that people up here do such unpleasant things in traffic and say such horrible things about each other.

When it came to defending herself against those who, in fact, might say something nasty to her, she replied in typically southern fashion. She would look right at the person and say, "If you don't like my peaches, then don't shake my tree."

My mother had a lot of other agricultural sayings, I remember. She would say, "You can't get blood out of a turnip," or, "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." As a youngster I had to have my mother explain many of her sayings to me. I was pretty concrete and was usually stuck trying to figure them out literally. Why, I wondered, would anyone want to get blood out of a turnip. She'd explain that you can't get blood out of a turnip meant that you couldn't get money from someone who didn't have any, for example. Or while I was wondering why you would ever cut a pig's ear off in the first place, she'd patiently clarify that you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear meant that you couldn't very easily turn a bad person into a good person.

My mother told me one day, when I had come to the defense of my brother against some of my friends in the neighborhood, that "Blood runs thicker than water." Again I needed some help. She explained that family, blood, made a deeper bond than friendship. A light bulb went on. My brother Chris and I could fight nearly to the death, but when Frankie Kieras pushed my brother one day when we were playing cowboys, I took Frankie's gun out of his hand and hit him over the head with it. His brand new plastic rifle smashed into several dozen pieces, but I didn't care. He had pushed my brother. Blood runs thicker than water. I'll come

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back to this story later, but for now notice the strong bond of kinship, even if it is tainted with boyhood aggressiveness..

Jesus tells us of a relationship very like this. Jesus says that the shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep. If the flock is threatened, if the wolf comes out of the woods, the shepherd will risk his life to protect his sheep. On the other hand the hired hand, for whom guarding the sheep is only a job, the hired hand sees the wolf coming and runs away. The hired hand leaves the flock to be assaulted by the wolf. The wolf snatches and scatters the sheep, and the hired hand has fled, Jesus says because “the hired hand does not care for the sheep.” On the other hand, almost like the bond of kinship, the bond between the shepherd and his sheep runs deep. The shepherd’s love for his sheep will cause him even to risk his life in their defense.

Even for us today, here in Cambridge where the sheep haven’t grazed on the common for quite some time – though I’m told the president of Harvard still has the right to graze his sheep there – even here in the city, far away from any farming or sheep flock, we still instinctively grasp the power of the metaphor.

Whenever many of us hear the beginning of the Twenty-third Psalm, when we hear those words, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want,” there comes over us a warmth and security that is almost palpable. “The Lord is my shepherd” immediately conveys the sense that we are loved and cared for by one who will protect us, who will even lay down his life for us. One, who even in the turmoil of life will give us sun-splashed, lush green pastures in which to rest, who will lead us by the still and peaceful waters, who will restore our tired and troubled soul. This shepherd will accompany us even in the valley of the shadow of death, and in the presence of those who hate us or wish to destroy us will prepare for us a feast and fill our cup to over-brimming. “The Lord is my shepherd” conveys the peace and assurance only a flock protected and cared for and loved by its shepherd may know.

Jesus is kin, and blood runs very thick. It is, no doubt, why Mother’s Day has become such a significant holiday for so many. It is certain that Mother’s Day is a day created by Hallmark. The card and flower and chocolate companies have designed and exploited the day to be sure. But they have had a particular wisdom. They knew that kin, and especially mothers, are ideally like the shepherd who loves and protects the flock. The idea is so natural and compelling that the day is a significant one, either happily or not. For those whose mothers did not live up to the ideal, there is often great pain. For those who have lost their mothers, there is often great loneliness. For those who have longed to be mothers, there is often discouragement. For those who are about to be mothers, there is often anticipation. For those who are mothers, there is often a great sense of responsibility. And for those who love their mothers, there is a warmth and affection that runs very. Very

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deep. Blood runs thick, especially the blood linking mother and offspring. It is meant to be very like the bond linking shepherd and flock.

Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. ...I lay down my life for my sheep." But Jesus goes on to say something else, too. He says, "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."

Here Jesus opens his arms beyond the normal family boundaries. I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold.

My best friend in college was someone I hated to get into an argument with. He always had the habit of getting me to agree to a conclusion I had no intention of agreeing to. You see Jesus do the same thing with the Pharisees all the time. The Pharisees think they can trap him by asking him whether they should pay taxes to Caesar – say 'no' and he would be treasonous, say 'yes' and he would be a bad Jew. But Jesus told them, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's," and they could not disagree with him.

Well folks, Jesus has got us today. Jesus has walked right into our Mother's Day with a perfect passage about the good shepherd. Jesus has pulled on the heartstrings of our good instincts. Jesus knows that we are putty in his hands when he talks about sheep, when he says he is our shepherd. The Twenty-third Psalm, our ideal of motherhood, the whole notion of love, protection and care within the bounds of kinship wash over us like a caressing wave on a summer beach. We are held in the embrace of our God.

It's not really fair. Jesus has grabbed us right where we are vulnerable. Jesus has exploited our love for family and kindred, for shepherd and fold. Jesus has told us that unlike the hired hand, unlike the outsider, he cares for the sheep. We shake our heads in agreement because we know that blood runs thicker than water. And then Jesus sneaks in what we didn't expect to hear at all, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold."

Often that statement is taken to mean that Jesus meant to make everybody Christians, or at least his followers. Maybe it means that, but I doubt it means it in the way a lot of people use it – that if you don't follow Jesus you are headed to damnation. I doubt that's what Jesus was saying, because he says rather plainly that he has sheep who are not of this fold. That is, Jesus says that he is a shepherd, he cares for and loves the sheep who are not in the fold, not in the family, not in the in group.

Jesus has snuck right into Mother's Day and then has told us that this warm feeling that we have about kindred, about the sheep and the shepherd, Jesus has told us that we are to extend that feeling, that love, that kinship beyond the bounds of our own flock or family. Jesus has exploited our understanding that blood runs thicker than water, our understanding that the shepherd cares more for his own

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flock than the hired man does, and then Jesus has taken that feeling, taken that love, taken that care and extended it beyond its normal bounds. And is it not inescapable that he asks us to do the same thing?

I want to go back to the story I began with, the day we were playing cowboys and I came to the protection of my brother. That day long ago when I broke Frankie Kieras's plastic rifle over his head is a memorable one for me. Not, unfortunately, because it was the only time I ever got angry. Not even because I learned about blood being thicker than water. But because of what I learned next. My mother made me get in the car, and then she took me with her to the store, the toy store. We went right to the cowboy section. She made me pick out the best plastic rifle there was. It was far more expensive than the toys we ever could afford. It was far better than the rifle I smashed over Frankie's head. I think for a moment I hoped I was being rewarded for my brotherly loyalty. But, of course, I wasn't. I was buying a replacement for Frankie's rifle. Later that day I was required even further humiliation. I was required to present Frankie with this present, this rifle far better than the one it replaced, far better than any I would ever have, and I was required to tell him, I'm sorry; here's a replacement for your gun I broke.

Today I am a grown up. As Paul says, when I was a child I was concerned with childish things – playing cowboys in the back yard and replacing a plastic gun. But it was still a pretty good lesson. For my mother, my shepherd and protector, was teaching me that there are other sheep in other folds whom we ought care for as if they were in ours.

Jesus asks us to look around, to look around at the world we live in, to look around and see the flocks which are not part of our immediate fold, and then Jesus asks us treat them as the shepherd does, not as the hired hand does. Jesus asks us to realize that we are throughout this creation, indeed, one community of God's people. There is no possibility, finally, of being the hired hand. For in the end Jesus wants us to know we are all family. Amen.

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