

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

### Cross of Glory Evangelical Lutheran Church

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### A Love Beyond Compare

#### John 10:11-18

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. <sup>13</sup> The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-- <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

Love is one of the most well worn words in the English language. We talk of loving our spouses, loving our children, loving our parents, loving our hobbies, loving our favorite sports team, loving certain foods, and, of course, loving our Lord. Those are all different kinds of love. For example, when a man says, "I love my wife" and then says "I love crawfish," we hope that he is using the word in two different ways. Because there are so many ways of using the word "love," it really needs a further definition to be truly appreciated. A wife likes to hear the words "I love you" from her husband, but she really likes it when she sees what he means by his loving actions and loving words toward her. This morning in our Gospel reading we have a very good definition of very special kind of love. This is the love between the Good Shepherd Jesus and his sheep. As we take a closer look at these words, we see just how beautiful this love is. It becomes even more beautiful when we compare it to the often imperfect love that we, the sheep, have for the Good Shepherd. Truly, his is a love beyond compare.

Jesus begins this beautiful description of love by calling himself the Good Shepherd. These words were very meaningful to Jesus' original audience as they were well-acquainted with the work of a shepherd and the time and energy the shepherd put into taking care of his sheep. I don't think we have any full-time shepherds in our congregation today (other than the spiritual kind). In order for Jesus' comparison to have meaning for us today, we have to be told what it means for him to be the Good Shepherd. And, thankfully, that is exactly what Jesus does for us. He says, "I am the good shepherd." And then he says precisely what that means.

He begins by saying, "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" The first thing we learn about the shepherd's love is that it is a love that is willing to sacrifice. That is the greatest kind of love there is. Jesus would say later, "*Greater love has no one*

*than this: that he lay down his life for his friends.*” Sacrifice is at the heart of the shepherd’s love for his sheep. Is this the same thing we could say about our love for our Savior? Are we willing to sacrifice our lives for his sake? None of us here have faced the circumstances where we are called upon to die for our Savior’s sake. But that doesn’t mean it couldn’t happen. All of us, on the other hand, have been called upon to sacrifice for our Savior. We are called on to give up sinful pleasures that come in the way of our relationship with our Lord. We are called upon to give up a portion of the resources the Lord has given us to further his work here and abroad. Are we always willing to make those sacrifices?

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, made the greatest sacrifice of all. First of all, he gave up his heavenly glory to come and live among his creation. Then, he gave up his life, enduring great pain and suffering, for the sake of his sheep. This sacrifice means that we are forgiven through his blood. That was what it took. And that was what he gave. Jesus was called upon to make such a tremendous sacrifice and he answered that call willingly. That is love beyond compare.

In the next couple of verses, Jesus describes his love for his sheep by contrasting it with the kind of love a hired hand has for his sheep. The hired hand only loves the sheep because they are bringing him a paycheck. He doesn’t truly care about the sheep. His greatest concern is looking out for himself. When we think of our love for our Lord or our love for others, don’t we often see that we have a bit of that hired hand in us? We are perfectly willing to love someone else as long as it benefits us. But when we are asked to think of others before ourselves and do everything for their sake, we are not always so willing.

Jesus’ love is not a love out of self-interest. Think of it—there was nothing in it for Jesus. He had nothing to gain by leaving his place in heaven and enduring the pain and suffering of this earth. There is nothing in it for him today to still watch over us and protect us. Yet we know that he does. We can be sure of this because this is the kind of love he showed in dying for us in the first place. We can be certain that Jesus always has our best interest in his heart and that he truly does care about us. We are his sheep and he will do anything to see that we are protected and provided for. That is a love beyond compare.

The next aspect of the Shepherd’s love that is so amazing is the knowledge he has of his sheep. The more you love someone, the more you want to get to know them, right? Our knowledge is always imperfect, however. Think of how well you know your Shepherd. You know him from his Word. You know what he has done for you. Yet there is still more to learn. You do not know him completely. That will not happen until you are with him in heaven. His knowledge of you, on the other hand, is perfect. Jesus says that he knows you just as he knows his Father. It is perfect knowledge. This thought could be a frightening one: Jesus knows everything I say and do. He knows how poorly I keep all his commands and how imperfect my love for him is. But we must remember that his perfect knowledge is tied in with his perfect love. As we trust in him for forgiveness, we don’t need to fear his knowledge of us. Rather, this knowledge brings us comfort. He

knows our needs. He knows our hurts. He knows our concerns. And he takes care of us. That is a love beyond compare.

The next thing that makes this love so special is that it is a love that reaches out. Jesus said, *I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.*” Jesus would not confine his love to only one nation or race. He knew that he had sheep from every nation, tribe, language and people. And he also wanted to bring them in to his sheep pen. Compare this love to the love we see today which is often marred by prejudice. Love is not truly love if it is reserved for only a certain group of people. True love reaches out. And that is the kind of love that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, shows us. And we ought to be very thankful that he does. If his love had not reached out to each and every one of us, we would not be here today. We would still be lost and wandering in our sin. But Jesus wanted to bring us in. And so he spoke his love to us in his Word and Sacrament. And know we are safe in his sheep pen. That is a love beyond compare.

All of the aspects of the Shepherd’s love that we have seen so far—sacrifice, selflessness, knowledge, outreach—are all aspects of love that we strive to achieve in our love for our Savior and for others. The final aspect of the Good Shepherd’s love that he describes in our reading is one we could never achieve. It is miraculous. Jesus said, *“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life-- only to take it up again.”<sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.*” The love that the Savior has for us is truly a love beyond compare. The way he showed that love is a miracle. He laid down his life and took it up again. He suffered and died for the sins of the world and he rose on Easter Sunday morning in triumph. That is the Shepherd’s love perfectly on display. That is why we smiled and sang, “Alleluia” on Easter Sunday. The empty tomb reminds us of how completely our Savior loves us. If he had only said he is the Good Shepherd, there wouldn’t be much to celebrate. But how showed he truly is the Good Shepherd by dying and rising again. Because he showed his love in that way, we can know for certain that all his words are true. He loves us completely with a love beyond compare.