

**John 10:11–18**

Fourth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

**Lessons for the Day: Acts 4:1–12; 1 John 3:16–24; John 10:11–18**

**The Good Shepherd and the Value of Lamb Chops**

April 21, 2024

*“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What is the value of a human life? I decided to go online and see what people think about that question. Believe it or not, in Western countries and other liberal democracies, estimates for the value of a statistical life typically range from US\$1 million—US\$10 million. This number is a value that is set for avoiding a fatality; for example, the United States FEMA estimated the value of a statistical life at US\$7.5 million in 2020. If we are looking at the value of our bodies it would depend on whether we were selling our organs, or whether our bodies are reduced to basic chemicals. Organs can be valuable; as base elements we are worth less than \$1,000.00. As I continued to look, I saw comments from many people that suggest human life isn’t worth saving. Some wonder why we think we are more valuable than animals. Others see the deplorable reality of man’s inhumanity to his fellow man and think that nature would be better off without humans. Thankfully, there were also those that would see life as precious and priceless.

We do see a great indifference to the value of life in this world. Babies are aborted, seen as nothing more than blobs of tissue and not as real people. Our society’s embrace of medical assistance in dying—what we used to call euthanasia—shows that life means little to many people. God has a very different view. The Lord who not only created man, but created man in His own image, sees great value in mankind. God is clear in the commandments, telling us: **“You shall not murder.”** (Exodus 20:13, ESV) Luther tells us what this means in the catechism: *We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.* (SC, 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment) God tells us that life is important, that we are to value it and care for our lives and the lives of others.

Do I matter? That is at the centre of many fears and concerns in our world today. Our text today is one of those many passages that bring hope to all those who feel alone, helpless or worthless. In the wonderful image of the caring shepherd, our loving Lord assures us that we are important and special to Him, for He is the Good Shepherd, who loves and cares for all of His sheep.

I wonder what people think about the title of the sermon today: *The Good Shepherd and the Value of Lamb Chops*. Isn’t that why shepherds raise sheep? In our day and age, and here in North America in particular, we have little understanding and appreciation for the ways of the shepherds set forth in the bible. We have large farms that raise herds that are prized for their wool; we have sheep ranches because people like lamb chops. Sheep are a commodity and that is what makes them important and valuable to the rancher. The concern is not for the sheep themselves, but for the income they bring. They are cared for and looked after so that they can provide the wool or the meat that will put money in the farmer’s pocket. The sheep exist for the sake of the shepherd, rather than the shepherd working for the sake of the sheep.

But when we read the beloved words Jesus speaks in our text today, we see something quite different. In agricultural terms, it would seem that Jesus would make a poor shepherd. ***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*** What wonderful words of promise these words are! We all want to feel that we are wanted and needed, that we are important to somebody. Jesus assures us very clearly that we are important to Him. Our good shepherd places so much value on His sheep that He will even die for them. Can you imagine some sheep rancher today doing the same thing? When King David was just a shepherd boy, he willingly placed himself in danger to protect his sheep. When a lion or a bear attacked his flock, he would bravely fight for his sheep. But that is the exception, not the rule—and God was at work in David, using him to point us to the Saviour. What ranch hand would be willing to risk his life for one of his sheep? Jesus said: ***He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf***

*snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.*

But Jesus says to us: *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.* May God, the Holy Spirit truly open the eyes of your heart that you will see in these words just how important you are to the Lord of heaven and earth! Jesus died for you. He did this willingly; yes, even deliberately. He lays down His life for the sheep, in order that we might have life. Christ did not have to sacrifice Himself. He could have overcome His enemies at any point in time without injury to Himself. When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, He told Peter: ***“Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?”*** (Matthew 26:53, ESV) Jesus was never outclassed, outnumbered or outgunned. At any point in time He could draw upon matchless power and save Himself. But He does not do that, for His concern is first and foremost for the sheep, and not for Himself.

There are many examples of people giving their lives for others. Some are particularly noble and inspiring. Some are acts of personal sacrifice that are widely known, some are known only to a few, and some are known to no one but God. Some of these personal sacrifices have benefited many; others have benefited only one person. The men who died in the two world wars are honoured for giving themselves so that we might live in freedom. Many of the passengers on the Titanic gave up their seats in lifeboats so that women and children might be saved. People have donated their kidneys to help others. Lives have been risked and lost to save victims of fires. Many look to the example of the first responders during the attacks on the twin Trade Towers in New York who died trying to save others. Mother Theresa gave up the comfort of life to serve among the blind, the poor, and the suffering of India. Such sacrifices draw forth our admiration. But none of these sacrifices equals that of the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep. No other sacrifice cost as much as His, for it is the holy God of all who Himself suffers and dies for us. No other sacrifice accomplishes as much as that of the Good Shepherd. Even the most noble human sacrifice cannot prevent the eventual reality of death from still affecting all people. He saves lives for all eternity. He died, but He also takes up His life again in His resurrection from the dead, so that each and every human soul that has or that will know life on this earth may also enjoy the glories of heaven. All of His creation is dear to Him, but we are His treasured possession. Jesus didn't give His life as a sacrifice for the best, the brightest, the richest, the holiest. No, He gave it for all people—for sinners like you and me. Even though there is not a single individual who has done anything worthy of His gift, the Lord of glory gave His most precious life that we might live.

That is how precious you are to the Good Shepherd. He does not value you as a lamb chop, but as His beloved child. He isn't concerned about what you can do for Him, but about what He can and does do for you. For your sake, He died and rose again that we might have life with Him forever. He is concerned with the day to day cares of our lives here and now. He cares about you when you feel unimportant or unloved. He cares about the things you are going through every day. He cares about your feelings of loneliness or grief or nervous tension. He cares about all the fears and concerns of His sheep. We will sing it in one of our hymns today: *For my Shepherd gently guides me, Knows my need and well provides me, Loves me ev'ry day the same, Even calls me by my name.* (LSB 740, st. 1) Yes, He knows your needs and He is there to help. He shares in every experience we have. He feels every feeling. Whatever step we must take, He takes it with us; whatever path we must walk, He walks before us. That is why David could say with confidence: ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”*** (Psalm 23:4–6, ESV)

One of the songs we sang when I was a youngster in Sunday School, says: *“Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.* I imagine that people today would see that as politically incorrect, maybe even racist. That was never the way I saw that simple song. It wasn't prejudice that was being expressed, but rather a recognition of the fact that no matter who we are or where we came from, we were all loved by the Lord of Heaven and earth. We were all one in Him. We sang the words and recognized that Jesus loves us all. In a world that so often seems loveless, where people can be so uncaring, our Lord shows His care and love for us in the greatest of ways. When we look at the Lord who died and rose for us, we can be sure of this: we are very precious to Him. We are not just sheep to be fed and prepared for the slaughterhouse. We are beloved children, who will have life with our Good and faithful Shepherd forever. Amen.