
The Good Shepherd Relationship by Jay LeBow

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The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
Youth Sunday

Alleluia! Christ is Risen. [The Lord is Risen, Indeed. Alleluia!]

Writing this sermon has been quite a journey for me. It has truly been a community effort.

From the beginning, many people have offered advice. My mom had a few good suggestions and guidelines; so did Brandon, our youth minister, whether I wanted them or not. Some advice was creative; some completely unsolicited. My buddy David even offered to write the sermon for me.

My good friend Clay suggested I write a biography of his life. He was born August 7th, 1990, at Northside Hospital. He is a Leo, and enjoys a relaxing afternoon nap or playing some video games, for those who wanted to know.

In the end, today's Scripture had a lot to say. Immediately I noticed and connected to the relationship of the hired hand. Picture a hired hand out in a field one night. Along comes a wolf, intent on assaulting the sheep. As Jesus tells us, the hired hand, who does not own the sheep, abandons them and runs away when the wolf appears. He is not willing to risk himself, for someone else's flock. He thinks, "I don't get benefits, I barely get three dinari a day. Why am I risking it for these sheep?"

The sheep are left to be snatched up by the wolf. They are alone, vulnerable, helpless--Already meat on the wolf's dinner table.

There are times in my life when I have been the hired hand.

For those of you that don't know, I work at an animal hospital. Occasionally, I get bitten by a dog. When that happens, I don't want to walk that dog again, thinking, I don't get paid enough, It's not worth the risk, that hurt!

But, if the biting dog was my own, would it change the relationship? Would I never walk the dog again? No, because I am invested in my own dog.

A common human response to challenges in life, and in personal relationships, is to run away.

I remember a time in middle school where my friend David and I began to grow apart. I put distance between us. We were into different things and I did not value our friendship. I was worried... Was he cool enough to hang out with anymore? My mom confronted me... wondering where David went. I played it off, telling her we just weren't getting along anymore.

That certainly wasn't the case. Looking back, I knew there was nothing wrong with David. The wolves inside me were

getting in the way. I was trying to justify my doubt... my complacency... my insecurity.

Likewise, we sometimes play the role of a hired hand when it comes to our relationship with God. When we are confronted by wolves, like insecurity, doubt, complacency, fear, laziness, temptation, or many others on a long list, we cut and run.

Sometimes... we even resort to blaming God or our neighbors to escape these wolves. We say things like, "God, what did I do to deserve this?" "How could you let this happen?" "Where were you when I needed you?"

Comically, this reaction comes out often when we're in the car. Like, if we are involved in a minor car accident or pulled over for speeding. Getting out of the car at the scene of a fender bender, our immediate reaction is to find fault with the other driver. Or, when pulled over by the officer, we wonder, how in the world they pulled us over?! There were other cars going faster than us, even passing us!

These seem obvious, but sometimes it's hard to even notice these wolves. When invited to the party Saturday night, we may not think about being too tired for church the next day. An important business deal may keep us late at work, away from our families. We're just too busy to make it to that bible study. Economic fears might affect our contributions. These wolves, thought subtle, can emerge when we least expect them.

As members of God's flock, we often act as if God plays the role of the hired hand. We worry God will see these "wolves" within us, and pass negative judgment.

What makes us think this way? Well, we are human. It's hard for us to comprehend anything beyond our human realm. We know how we would react to someone who doubts us... angers us, lets us down. So how can God remain faithful when we are so sinful?

God views our relationship in an entirely different context. To us, God and religion are things we can run away from, just like a hired hand abandoning the flock. But for God, that is not the case.

Jesus tells us this morning, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."

This is perhaps no clearer to us, than during the Easter season. However, when Jesus said this, did he intend for it to be taken literally? I don't think so. One does not have to physically die to lay down their lives for a cause. Jesus had given us his life long before he died. He spent his days, traveling the world, teaching, healing, comforting. This is where I can learn the most from Jesus.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Even after being denied by Peter three times, Jesus remained faithful. Even when Judas betrayed the Son of Man for thirty meager pieces of silver... Jesus remained faithful. When the disciples fell asleep in the garden... Jesus remained faithful. Jesus always remains the Good Shepherd.

My grandfather was also a great example of someone who gave his life. He passed away recently, and was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. During the service, when my grandmother was handed the flag, it was "on behalf of a grateful nation".

My grandfather, while not sacrificing his life for his country, sacrificed a great deal for his country. He spent most of his youth at war, from World War II, to Korea, to the beginnings of Vietnam. He missed time away from his family. And he did so without hesitation, for he too was a good shepherd.

My old buddy David was also a good shepherd. When I abandoned him... he remained faithful. Even when I tried to justify my behavior... he remained. And when I was ready to be friends again, it was easy. David had always been there. He knew I would be back.

God does know us, but doesn't abandon us when the wolves appear. God accepts us as we are, and loves us regardless. God is invested in creation.

God sent Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to help us understand this extraordinary investment.

Just as God invests in us, we are invited to invest in God. Join me this morning, as we begin to notice our "hired hand tendencies." Join me this morning, as we learn what it means to become the good shepherd.

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