

Think about the closest human relationships: the relationship between husband and wife; the relationship between parents and children; the relationship between best friends. These relationships point us to an even greater relationship: the relationship between you and Jesus. In the Gospel readings for the next few weeks Jesus is going to talk with us about his relationship with us. Next week he is going to say “I am the vine, you are the branches.” So his relationship with us is like the relationship between a vine and its branches. The next week he will say “I no longer call you servants, instead I have called you friends.” (John 17:15) So his relationship with us is one of friendship. And that’s an amazing thing that the Son of God calls us his friends. In the Gospel today Jesus describes our relationship with him as the relationship between a Shepherd and his sheep. Today we are going to see that Jesus is Our Good Shepherd. 1. He died to save us, and 2. He lives to protect us.

First, he died to save us. That’s the kind of relationship that Jesus has with us: he loves us enough to die for us! Jesus says, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).** We usually don’t think of the job of shepherd as being a dangerous job. But it was and probably still is a dangerous job. It was a dangerous job because wolves and other ferocious animals would try to attack the sheep and shepherds would try to protect the sheep. For example, in the Old Testament, King David was a shepherd and several times he had to protect his sheep from a lion or a bear. Listen to what King David said about the dangerous job of being a shepherd: **“David said to Saul, ‘Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.’” (1 Samuel 17:34-37).** Being a shepherd was a dangerous job. The shepherd sometimes had to risk his life to protect the sheep.

Jesus contrasts himself with a hired hand who helps watch the sheep when things are safe but who will run away when danger comes: **“The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own 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. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep” (John 10:12-13).** The hired hand runs away because he does not care about the sheep enough to die for them. But Jesus’ relationship with us is much different. He cares about us enough to die for us.

Jesus says, **“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).** Not only did Jesus put his life in danger for us, Jesus laid down his life for us. There is a hymn verse which says, “The Shepherd dies for sheep that loved to wander.” We loved to wander and the natural consequence of that is death. God is the source of life and we separated ourselves from Him. God’s commands are the path of life but we wandered down the path that leads to death. God said to Adam and Eve, “If you eat from this tree, you will surely die.” The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death.” But Jesus said, “I will die instead of them. I will die so that they can live. I’ll die to take away their sins and forgive their sins so that they can have eternal life.”

That’s his relationship with us. He loved us so much he died for us. Jesus’ relationship with us goes beyond the relationship that an earthly shepherd would have with his sheep. An earthly shepherd cares about his sheep and might even put his life in danger to protect the sheep, like King David did. But does an earthly shepherd care enough about his sheep that he would lay down his life for them? No. And rightly so. Jesus said that we are much more valuable than birds. Shepherds are much more valuable than sheep. Shepherds would not lay down their life for the sheep. But that’s the amazing thing. Jesus the Son of God cares enough about us his sheep to lay down his life for us. That’s the kind of relationship he has with us. He cares so much about us that he laid down his life to save us. That’s the kind of relationship Jesus has with you: He died to save you and he also lives to protect you.

Jesus says, **“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to 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 authority to take it up again” (John 10:17-18)** In the church year Good Shepherd Sunday is always in the season of Easter. That’s interesting because here Jesus talks about laying down his life for us, dying on the cross. So why is Good Shepherd Sunday in the season of Easter? Well, if a wolf attacks and the shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep, that’s an amazing sacrifice by the shepherd. But if the Shepherd stays dead, then the flock will be even more vulnerable to attack than they were before. If the shepherd stays dead, then the sheep will have no one to protect them. Our Good Shepherd laid down his life to save us from our sins, but our Good Shepherd did not stay dead. He rose from the dead three days later. Jesus says, **“I lay down my life – only to 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 authority to take it up again” (John 10:17-18)**

We have a living Good Shepherd. He laid down his life but then he took it up again on Easter Sunday. A dead shepherd wouldn’t be able to protect us, but we have a Shepherd who has been raised and who now makes full use of his almighty power as God. That kind of a Shepherd can protect us from whatever might want to harm us. We have an invincible and a living Good Shepherd watching over us. That means that he’s going to protect us from whatever might harm us and if he does let some harm come to us he going to make it so that it somehow serves our eternal good.

Sometimes the wolves that Jesus needs to protect us from are the ones that come in sheep’s clothing. Maybe some people try to get you to sin with them, whatever that sin might be, and you long for a meaningful relationship so much that you sometimes sadly are tempted to do something sinful to try to get it. But Jesus cares for you infinitely more than they do. Your relationship with him is better than anything the devil can offer you. Don’t fall for the devil’s trap and trade the real thing for something counterfeit. Even the good things of this world, if they are used as a replacement for Jesus, they will leave us eternally disappointed. Our Good Shepherd lives to protect us from the devil who tries lure us away from Jesus. Our Good Shepherd lives to forgive us for the times when we have fallen for Satan’s lies.

Our Good Shepherd is able to give us just what we need because our Good Shepherd knows us. Jesus says, **“I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14)**. If I were to look at a crowd of sheep, I would not be able to distinguish one from another. But the shepherd who is with the sheep every day would know each one of the sheep. He would be able to say, “This one is shy.” “This one got lost once and is still a little scared from the experience.” Our Good Shepherd has the kind of relationship with us that he knows us. He knows the scars we have from the past. He knows the difficulties we are facing in the present. And he knows the fears we have for the future. But it’s going to be OK because we have a living Good Shepherd. For those scars from the past: he anoints my heads with oil to heal them. For those difficulties in the present: 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. And as for those fears for the future: I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. That’s the kind of relationship Jesus has with us: He’s our Good Shepherd. He died to save us and he lives to protect us. Amen.