

The Noble Shepherd
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 53:4-6
Reading from the Gospels: John 10:11-16

You know the old saying, *Feet don't fail me now?* Well, I seem to be at that stage of life when my feet, muscles, joints, hips, and back have launched an elaborate conspiracy, a rotating system of muscle failure, intent on mutually assured destruction. I haven't been reduced to chair aerobics yet, but I'm no longer protesting the house manager's 11th commandment: Thou shalt not even think about another marathon. No arguments here. So, on a recent day off, I went to the Y and climbed on one of those elliptical machines that mimic a run minus the pounding of the pavement.

The guy on the machine next to me asked, "So, are you retired or in sales?" Of course, he was implying that any dude working out at that time of day was either retired with no place else to go, or had the flexibility of one of those hyper-energetic, peripatetic sales guys with a phone clipped to his ear, so that he can close the deal and simultaneously hit his target heart rate. I would say I was grateful he assumed I could be the latter, but I'm fairly sure he was just being polite, and surmised I was probably the former.

I'm not particularly anxious about aging, though. Let's just say I'm just managing the on-the-job training.

I love Nate Bargatze's perspective on aging, even though he's twenty years younger than me. He says, "I miss being young. Your 20s are great. You're down for whatever ... Your friends call you, and they're like, 'You wanna go?' And you're like, 'I'll go.' You don't even know where you're going ... Your 30s come and you're like, 'Where are we going? ... How late are they open? ... Is it loud? ... I'm going to drive separate.' Your 40s come and you're like, 'I'm not going ... I'm mad that you thought I would go.'" He's right, isn't he? I can relate. You wanna go? *Man, are you kidding? That's past my bedtime ... Go out to eat? What and miss Jeopardy?*

It's not that we don't want to be committed to our friends. But how far are you willing to go? I'll think about giving a friend a kidney, even pray about it. But I'm not going with you to the midnight movie. Years ago, a friend up in Morganton asked me to go with him to the Duke/Carolina basketball game. Not many opportunities to do that. I said, *Sure, let's go.* ESPN scheduled the game for 9:00pm, and since it was the second of the televised games, it started late. We got back to Morganton at like 3:00am.

Great game, but I'm not doing that again. *Hey, you wanna... No, no I don't.*

How far are you willing to go for a friend? Can they borrow your ladder?

Sure. Will you watch their toddler while they take their infant to the ER?

Yes. Will you help them move a sleeper couch up a flight of stairs? Uh ...

how many steps? How far will you go to help ... to do a favor ... to get them out of a jam ... or bail them out of jail?

What risks or sacrifices are you willing to undertake for another person? At what point do you say to a friend, neighbor, acquaintance, employer, or stranger, *I'm sorry, but I've got to take care of me and mine?*

Perhaps you remember what the Apostle Paul said, "Rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."

"While we still were sinners Christ died for us..." Whoa! That's a whole different level, because we're not just talking about a favor for a friend; we're talking about a self-sacrifice of life ... for us ... in spite of the fact we're not even all that likable much of the time; even though our days are marked by thoughts, deeds, or negligence which represent the opposite

of what Jesus taught and what God would have us to do. “While we still were sinners Christ died for us...” That sounds a bit more significant than taking someone to the airport during rush hour. Can we even conceive of such a love?

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Okay, that sounds nice, maybe a saying that would look good on a cross stitch. But, to be honest, we’re not at all sure what Jesus is talking about. I doubt we have many shepherds here today. We probably have a couple of folks who grew up on a farm, a farm that may have had a few sheep, but probably not an operation centered on sheep, much less a lifestyle centered on sheep — a bedouin’s life, packing up the tent and moving from place to place in search of fields on which the sheep may feed, the constant vigilance required to protect the sheep from predators. You can’t afford to lose a single one.

You may have presented a sheep at the 4H fair when you were 12, but you probably haven’t known a life contingent on the mutual dependence between shepherd and sheep. Yet, there was a time when the image of shepherd and sheep was close, familiar, and real. If you hadn’t lived the

shepherd's life for at least a part of your life, you knew plenty of folks who did, and so you were familiar with the duties, challenges, headaches, joys, struggles, and sorrows of working with sheep.

That's why shepherds and sheep are regularly showing up in scripture. I'm not sure what the comparable image would be today. Perhaps Jesus would be the good Amazon driver, always timely and protecting your package with his life. In the biblical world, people knew shepherds and sheep, their presence in life was ubiquitous enough that it became a primary image to describe the relationship between leaders and their people. This was in no small part due to the fact that so many of Israel's leaders and founders had their roots in the shepherd's life. What was Moses doing when he spied the burning bush? He had taken the sheep up on the mountain to graze. His father-in-law had gotten him into the business when Moses was (pun intended) on the lamb from Pharaoh's police.

What was David doing when the prophet Samuel showed up at Jesse's house looking to anoint a future king? David was out in the field tending sheep. When the current king, Saul, was wrestling with depression and heard about this kid who was taking music lessons and played a mean

guitar, he sent for David because Spotify hadn't launched yet. Perhaps David would have one of those playlists with names like — Relaxing reading; easy classical; coffee table jazz — music that would soothe his troubled spirit. Guess where Saul's messengers found David? Out in the field tending the sheep; maybe practicing his arpeggios on his Martin flat-top as they fed.

In fact, it was David's work as a boy shepherd that equipped him to face off with the giant Goliath. When David showed up to find Saul's army cowering before the mighty Philistine, guess what David's older brother asked him, "What are you doing here? Who's keeping the sheep, you little cretin?" But David ignored his brother, as little brothers tend to do, and David informed Saul: "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God."

And by golly, David went right out and posterized the Philistine, thus delivering Israel from a grave threat. With that, the image of shepherd

became closely tied to David and Israel's future kings. And when Israel's kings departed from God's ways, ignoring their role as the shepherd of God's people, the prophet Ezekiel called them out: "Thus says the Lord God: 'Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ... You do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered...'"

And so, Ezekiel relates the Lord's intentions: "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak."

It is in this spirit that Jesus declares his intentions: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care 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.”

The good shepherd is all in ... holding nothing back ... protecting the flock with his whole being, even his life, not wanting anyone to be lost ... anyone! Yes, that means you. The good shepherd knows you completely, in all your flawed glory. When you are out there wandering, getting lost, the good shepherd doesn't wait for you to find your way home. No, the good shepherd goes out to find you. What did the Lord say through Ezekiel? “I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.” That means you. You can sing with the psalmist: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want ... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.”

And guess what? As wonderful as it is to know the Lord is your shepherd; it is equally important to appreciate that it's not just about you. The good shepherd says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." That means even the people who are not like you; who live differently than you, maybe worship differently than you; people who you may well not like and certainly do not understand; people you have never met; people who don't vote like you; people who act like you're an inconvenience because the world, in their mind, is theirs. The good shepherd says, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices."

What wondrous love is this? The hymn expresses the inevitable and utter befuddlement that accompanies such hints of how far the love of God extends. Love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Perhaps you remember that heart-wrenching song from the musical *Les Mis*, perfectly pitched to draw plenteous tears from theater-goers. With

the backdrop of the French Revolution, Jean Valjean offers up a prayer for the injured suitor of his dearest young Cosette. Do you remember breaking out the hankies with the earnestness of Valjean's prayer?

He is young
He's afraid
Let him rest
Heaven blessed.
Bring him home

If I die, let me die
Let him live
Bring him home

It is a prayer that in fact has been answered for all, a witness to a love deep enough that the Giver of life offers up his own for the sake of all others. "All we like sheep have gone astray." Yet, "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities ... and by his bruises we are healed." The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. Amen.