

Title: "In the Frame of the Shepherd's Care"
5/11 Sermon – 4th Sunday of Easter (Confirmation Sunday & Mother's Day)
Rev. Lindsey Odom
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 23:1-6
Reading from the New Testament: John 10:1-18

You've probably heard the phrase, "A picture is worth a thousand words." I might take that a bit too literally. If you were to scroll through my iPhone, you'd find thousands of photos—pictures of friends, family, youth group retreats and experiences, and, of course, my dog, Cassie. Anyone who knows me well knows that when I go phone shopping, storage space is a top priority! Not long ago, I was having coffee with another youth pastor, and as we swapped ministry stories, he shared something that made me feel a little better. He told me about walking into an AT&T store to buy a phone and confidently asking for the iPhone with the most storage, specifically, the one with a full terabyte of memory. The salesperson gave him a puzzled look and asked, "What do you do that you need that much storage?" Without missing a beat, my friend replied, "I'm a youth pastor." He explained that his phone holds photos and videos of youth group events, pictures of his family, event plans, emails, sermon notes, memories—everything. The salesperson looked genuinely baffled, trying to understand how a youth pastor could need the kind of phone storage usually reserved for filmmakers.

But really, why do we take so many pictures? Because images help us hold on to what matters. They let us capture moments, emotions, and memories. A single image can bring back a flood of emotion and make us feel like we're right back in a specific place, time, and moment. And Jesus understood the power of images. Jesus often used word pictures to reveal deep truths about who he is and what he means for us as believers/ followers of Christ.

One of the most striking ways Jesus did this was through the “I AM” statements in the Gospel of John. In Greek, the phrase is *ego eimi* (ἐγώ εἰμι). The use of both words, "ego" and "eimi" add weight and emphasis. These statements are not just theological claims; rather, they are personal revelations. They invite us to see who Jesus is and, in turn, who we are in relationship to him.

In today's Gospel text from John 10, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” That image runs deep. It ties into the beautiful picture from Psalm 23, which says, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Together, these texts reflect God's deep care for us, God's flock. Jesus uses the image of the shepherd to show us his loving, watchful, sacrificial care.

In Jesus' time, shepherding was a significant, though often undervalued, occupation. The geography of ancient Palestine with its hills and dry terrain made it ideal for grazing sheep. Sheep and goats were essential to daily life: for milk, for wool, for meat, and even for temple sacrifices. And yet, shepherds themselves were seen as lowly. They were often poor, uneducated, and looked down upon. But their work was vital. A good shepherd was everything to their flock. Sheep are not independent creatures. They're easily frightened, prone to wandering, and generally defenseless. Without a shepherd's constant attention and care, they cannot survive. Shepherds guided them to pasture/ water, protected them from predators, treated their injuries, and searched for them when they were lost. A shepherd didn't just clock in for a shift. Rather, they lived with their sheep, slept near them, and led them with personal knowledge and care.

That's the image Jesus uses to describe himself. In John 10:11, he says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” This is not just poetic language. Jesus is describing the very heart of who he is. Jesus isn't a distant protector. Rather, Jesus is the

one who steps in front of danger and lays down his life out of love for us. In verses 14-15, Jesus deepens that image when he says, “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.” Jesus’ relationship with his followers is not surface level. It’s rooted in deep, mutual knowledge—the same kind of knowledge that exists between him and God. The Greek word used here for “know” is *ginōskō*, meaning intimate, personal understanding. It’s about connection, not just information. It’s about being seen, known, and loved.

Jesus tells us that just as he knows the Father and is known by the Father, he knows us. This is extraordinary. The depth of intimacy that exists between Jesus and God is extended to us. The love that Jesus receives from the Father is now being offered to us, his sheep.

That kind of knowledge isn’t distant or conditional; rather, it’s close and relational. Jesus knows our names, our stories, our hurts, our doubts, our joys, our fears, and our dreams. And he doesn’t turn away from any of it. He draws more near. He claims us as his own.

In contrast, Jesus talks about the false shepherds—the hired hands who run away at the first sign of trouble. He’s likely referring here to religious leaders like the Pharisees who failed to care for the people. These false shepherds don’t truly know or love the sheep. They don’t sacrifice; rather, they abandon. But Jesus is different. He stays. He protects. He lays down his life. And, in a claim that no other shepherd can make, he takes his life up again through the resurrection, which can only happen by divine command.

This radical love and commitment are what defines the Good Shepherd. And in this image, we find a powerful calling—not just to know Jesus, but to be shaped by him. Jesus

doesn't just reveal who he is in these metaphors. He also shows us who we are—and who we are called to become.

As people made in the image of God, we are invited to reflect Christ's love in our own lives. Just as Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we are called to live as shepherds too - to care for others by noticing those who are hurting or feel left out, standing beside people in difficult times, and protecting and guiding with love and gentleness. We are called to stand up for people when it would be easier to stay silent. We are called to lead others toward hope, kindness, justice, and peace, just like Jesus leads us.

This is what it means to live like Jesus: to extend care, compassion, love, and presence. To step toward others when the world tells us to turn away. To know people, not just facts about them, but their hearts and their lives. We are called to listen to their stories and to make space for them within our community so that they feel loved, valued, nurtured, and known as the beloved child of God that they are.

And here's the good news: we don't do this alone. The Good Shepherd goes with us. He walks ahead, guiding our steps, and remains beside us, strengthening our hearts. Jesus shows us the way to live, and he equips us with what we need to follow.

Being a disciple of Jesus isn't just about receiving love—it's about being transformed by it. It's about letting that love shape how we see ourselves and how we treat others. It's about knowing that we belong to Jesus—and then living according to this truth. Our voices, our faith, and our unique way of reflecting Christ's love matters. While the journey ahead won't always be easy, none of us walk it alone. Confirmands, it is my hope that you will always remember that this church will walk with you, and even more importantly, your Shepherd will go before you.

This is especially meaningful today as we celebrate our Confirmands today—those who are choosing to affirm their baptism and step more fully into life as disciples of Christ. You are saying yes to a life of faith, yes to following Jesus, and yes to living in community with God’s people. But more than that, you are recognizing something even deeper: that long before you chose Jesus, Jesus chose you. He has been walking with you since the beginning, calling you by name, holding you close as the Good Shepherd of your soul.

And as we also pause to honor the mothers and mother-figures in our lives today, whether biological mothers, grandmothers, aunts, teachers, mentors, or friends, we see another reflection of this shepherding love. A mother’s love gives us a glimpse of Christ’s love. Like a mother watching over her child, comforting them, guiding them, and loving them even when they stumble, Christ our Good Shepherd walks with us through every season of life.

Many of us first encounter the idea that we are loved, protected, and never alone through the care of a nurturing adult. These nurturing adults within our lives like our moms etc. are human reflections of God’s care.

And even this most beautiful human love is just a reflection of the perfect love we find in Christ. In Jesus, every longing is met. Every fear is faced. Every hurt is held. Every joy is shared. So, wherever you are on your faith journey today—whether you’re just beginning, or you’ve walked with Christ for many years—hear this truth:

You are already home. The road may wind and twist. The path may be uncertain at times. But you have never wandered beyond the reach of the Good Shepherd’s love. Henri Nouwen, Dutch priest, professor, and author, writes, “When Christ has become our shepherd, our refuge, our fortress, then we can reach out to him in the midst of a broken world and feel at home while

still on the way.¹” This quote emphasizes God's role in providing Christ to be our shepherd, who guides, protects, and provides for God's flock, so that even when we face difficult times along the way, we can find a sense of belonging and purpose and feel truly at home in Christ.

Jesus, our good shepherd, knows the deepest needs and longings of those entrusted to his care, of each one of us and he calls us to follow so that we can dwell and live with Christ and be at home forever. He promises to walk beside us. He goes before us. He knows our names and he claims us as his own.

As we honor those who have guided and nurtured us, may we remember the One who never lets us go. Go now in faith, trusting the voice of the Shepherd who calls you, who leads you, and who loves you beyond measure. Go forth, confident in the one who calls us and trusting that Christ will continue the good work he has already begun in us. And as you continue to walk forward in your faith, rest in the good shepherd's grace, trusting in his leading, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are held, you are at home in Christ, and you are deeply loved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/you-are-at-home-while-still-on-the-way/>