Today is what is known as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’. The image of *Shepherd* is used throughout scripture because the occupation of shepherd was so common in ancient Israel, and sheep were a big part of the lives of the people who relied on them for *food*; for *wool*; and for *religious sacrifice*.

Today, in 2018, we hear about the *Good Shepherd* and get this sentimental picture in our minds of a gentle and caring farmhand, smiling while he holds a cuddly little lamb in his arms – but, I think that image short-changes us on what Jesus was driving at with the ‘Good Shepherd’ metaphor.

Because, in reality, shepherds were pretty *rugged* and *surly* types of characters! Those staffs they carried weren’t just walking sticks – they used those staffs to swat the sheep into obeying them, and as weapons to fight off wolves and other predators. And by extension, we have to think about what the goal of a shepherd was – it was *not* to love the sheep and cuddle with cute little lambs - no, their jobs were merely to protect them until they were mature enough to send to market so that they could eventually be butchered for meat! The sheep *weren’t beloved pets* – they were dollar signs! There is really nothing sentimental about that image!

So, as usual, I think Jesus is making a *bold* statement to present a *bold* image - the image of Jesus as the *Good* Shepherd that *lays down* ***his*** *life for his sheep*. What!? That doesn’t make sense. The Shepherd lays down ***his*** life for the sheep? The definition of a ‘Good Shepherd’ from a commercial point of view is to get those sheep in one piece to market for consumption – not even the best earthly shepherd is going to give his life for a sheep – he may fight off a wolf to the best of his ability, but the moment he realizes his life is in danger, he’s getting out of there!

**Jesus turns that thinking on its head.** *He’s laying down* ***his*** *life*. Instead of letting the sheep die for him, he’s going to die for his sheep. He’s not letting anything happen to His flock. He’s not letting anything happen to *us*. And how much more stark is the *reality* than the *metaphor* – that the God of the universe lays down his life for *us –* for *our* sins. When we sit with this reality, we realize there are no words other than to be shear amazement and awe at the love Christ has for us through this new radical image of the role of Shepherd.

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Now, on the other side of the coin, we take a moment to reflect on sheep, because that is what Jesus compares us to. And that isn’t necessarily flattering, because sheep are pretty *stupid* animals. There are stories of a sheep accidently falling off of a cliff, only for the rest of the flock to walk off that cliff as well simply because following is really all they know how to do.

But fortunately *we are not sheep* – as the 2nd reading from the 1st Letter of John points out quite clearly, we are *children of God*. Unlike sheep, we are able to recognize our status as God’s Children; we are able to recognize the significance of the willingness of the Good Shepherd to lay down his life; we are able to recognize that Jesus is the stone rejected by the builders, which is now the corner stone.

But at the same time, that leaves us with a *choice* – the choice to humbly submit to the Shepherd, to listen to his voice; to trust Him; to allow him to *lead* us. Or, we can choose to lead ourselves, believing we know better. I don’t know about you, but when I stray from the Shepherd and go along my own path, sooner or later I end up feeling exposed with the wolves surrounding me.

Fortunately, Jesus’ fold is never far away – His voice is never that distant from us. He tells us that he has “*other sheep not of this fold*”, and they will hear his voice as well. Those of us who stray, and those friends and family that we know that seem completely outside of the flock – they are not *lost* sheep. They are still *his* sheep, and he does promise that *all* will hear his voice.

Jesus’ fold today is the Church. We find safety here in this building and in our lives by entrusting ourselves to the Good Shepherd through the Church that he has left us – the Church that he has *laid down his life for*. This stole which all priests wear under our vestments is a constant reminder of our responsibility as shepherd – the stole around our neck is a symbolic reminder of how we are to take the flock entrusted to us upon our own shoulders, and lead you to the Good Shepherd.

By extension, my great hope is that all of you here today who recognize the voice of Christ and have come to trust in the peace, safety and promise of salvation that comes from being part of His flock, also take on this Shepherd’s role in your own live – helping to carry others on your shoulders – helping others to hear the voice of the Jesus – helping others to know that they are beloved children of God who are welcome back within his fold no matter how far from it they may be - helping others to know the *joy* of the gospel that our Lord is not just a Shepherd – he is the *Good* Shepherd who willingly lays down his life for you, and for me…