“Sheep, Shepherds and Sheepdogs”
John 10:11-18
Dr. Christopher C. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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I have been called many different things over the years, some of which I cannot repeat in this holy time and place. And when it comes to the names I can reference here, it’s not just about formal titles, whether people call me “Reverend” or “Doctor” or both. “The Reverend Doctor” does sound nice, but it is a bit stuffy.

The founding pastor at my previous church, Jack Noffsinger, knew people wanted to respect his position, but he didn’t like formality. So, he implemented an interesting compromise. Rather than having them call him “Dr. Noffsinger” or simply “Jack,” he had them call him “Dr. Jack” which they did throughout his 30-year tenure there.

But I’m not just talking about formal titles but other names for my role. Some people have called me “preacher” and there is nothing wrong with this. To state the obvious, I do preach. Others have called me “preacher man” which is “O.K.” too. It underscores the humanity of the preacher, though it could be interpreted as suggesting a third possible gender – man, woman and preacher man!

Still others like the title “Senior Minister.” I have mixed feelings about this one. It points to the responsibility of the role in a multi-staff setting, but I feel a bit like a retired missionary who was considering a teaching position at a seminary that required the candidate to have a terminal degree. He said he didn’t want anything “terminal.” I don’t want to be anything “senior” though I am getting there far too quickly!

In one setting an older deacon called me “parson.” That was a new one, and an old one. It made me think of “The Parson’s Tale” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales. “Whan that Aprille with his shoure soote, the droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote…” I’m not sure it is a good image today – parson…

And just this past Friday I received a new title at the retirement reception for FBC member John Smith who has served the judicial
branch of our state for over 40 years, the last six of which he was Director of the Administrative Office of the Courts. Noting how little time he has been able to give to his church while he has been Director of the NCAOC, at least by his standards, John said his pastor stood there at his retirement reception looking like a vulture sitting on a fencepost. I resembled that comment. John needs some time to rest, but then...

But, all kidding aside, the title I prefer is the most obvious – “pastor.” It is a good word, a biblical word, taken from the Latin pastor and the Greek poimen which means “shepherd.” It’s a word Jesus applies to himself in today’s Gospel reading. “I am the good shepherd,” he says, and because he does, almost everyone who seeks to follow him, especially in a leadership role, identifies with this image. Whatever else we do, we are shepherds, guardians of the flock, pastors, like Jesus.

But not exactly like Jesus. There is only one Jesus and thus only one “good shepherd” in the sense he is naming here. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way. “All of the other shepherd ministries of the church of Jesus Christ are not the establishing of a second or third shepherd next to the good shepherd, but rather they allow Jesus alone to be the good shepherd of the congregation… it is his shepherd ministry in which the ‘pastors’ participate, or else they ruin the ministry and the herd (Theological Education Underground, p. 548).” Indeed.

Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, put it this way. Jesus is the good shepherd and we are the sheepdogs who guide the flock and keep it together, who listen to the command of our master shepherd and run around doing what we are asked to do. “Sheepdog” is a title I can embrace.

But what exactly is a shepherd and thus what does this name or image say about Jesus, those of us who shepherd churches in his name, and any church that embraces this imagery? We have a general idea of what a shepherd is but very few of us have any firsthand experience with sheep and shepherding other than our large animal veterinary professor and those who grew up on farms. Furthermore, we need to consider how Jesus is using the image here. What exactly does he mean when he says he is the good shepherd and what are the implications for us?
In order to appreciate what Jesus is saying, we need to understand the context of these words. The whole idea of shepherding sheep may feel very warm and fuzzy to us, but from everything I am told, sheep are not the cuddly animals they might appear to be and the work of shepherding is anything but warm and fuzzy. Furthermore, the catalyst for Jesus using this imagery and the way he focuses it give it an edge.

Jesus has healed a man born blind and been criticized for doing so by the Pharisees. Now, he says not just that he is the good shepherd but that he is not like the bad shepherds or hired hands who run away at the first sign of danger and leave the flock unprotected. Who might these bad shepherds be? The Pharisees, of course! And to make matters worse, numerous times in prophetic literature – for example, Jeremiah 23:1-2 and Ezekiel 34:5-6 – a distinction is made between the promised good shepherd and the bad shepherds who scatter the sheep of Israel.

So, the Pharisees are on the bad end of a joke rooted in sacred tradition. It comes as no surprise that they don’t like what Jesus is saying. After our reading ends, John says the Jewish leaders are divided about what Jesus has said. Some say he has a demon and is out of his mind. Why should they listen to him? Others insist these are not the words of a man with a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?

There is nothing warm and fuzzy about being a shepherd. It is hard work with stubborn animals, dangers all around and messes to clean up. And there is nothing warm and fuzzy about Jesus’ use of the shepherd imagery. It is hard and dangerous work too. The context of conflict foreshadows this reality, the details of the teaching make it clear, and the fact that some conclude that Jesus has a demon reminds us that not everyone responds positively to anyone, including Jesus. We need to keep all of this in mind as we reflect upon the role of shepherd.

But keeping this in mind, the basic role of the shepherd is to care for sheep and protect them from harm. Jesus refers to the threat of wolves, predators who might attack the sheep, but another threat sheep face in this part of the world is simply wandering astray or falling off a cliff. The shepherd’s responsibility is to guide the sheep to safe places, keep the sheep together and prevent them from falling to their death.
This is the background for the familiar psalm we have read as a call to worship, using Elmo Scoggin’s translation. God is envisioned as the shepherd who does all of this for us. God guides us to grassy meadows and pure water. God leads us into paths of righteousness. And God keeps us safe by the comfort of a shepherd’s rod and staff.

This is what the familiar proverb is about - spare the rod and spoil the child. The rod is not a bludgeoning tool. It is a gentle guide to tap the sheep on the side so that it does not fall off the cliff. Thy rod and thy staff shall comfort me… and guide me… and keep me safe.

This is what a shepherd does, what God does, what Jesus does; and this is what we are called to do for one another. Some of us have a leadership role to play in the shepherding community and thus, we spend a significant part of our time caring for people in different ways. Some of these are known. Names are listed each week. But many of them are not known. Some of the greatest needs, some of greatest threats people face, are not easy to talk about and thus are not listed anywhere.

No one knew about the family I helped get their teenager to a treatment facility years ago, not only by going with them, but by chasing him down when he ran from the car, ducking repeatedly when he tried to take my head off with a two-by-four, and holding him when he finally collapsed in my arms. No one knew about the woman who called in the middle of the night because her husband was pointing a gun at her, needing assurance, needing someone to calm him down, needing a way out of the mess she was in. No one knows about many of the most significant ways shepherds care for sheep and try to protect them.

But shepherding is not just one person’s responsibility. Those of us in leadership roles participate in the shepherd ministry of Jesus, to quote Bonhoeffer, but all of us are part of a shepherding community. We are all called to follow the good shepherd in caring for each other, shielding each other from harm and guiding each other to better paths. It is not always warm and fuzzy, as many here know. It is seldom easy. But it is what we are called to do and who we are called to be.

The basic role of the shepherd is to care for the sheep and protect them from harm. Good shepherds do this even when it is challenging.
But Jesus also says he knows his own and they know him. His sheep recognize his voice and listen to him in a way they listen to no one else. He is talking about a kind of intimacy and connection between shepherd and sheep, between him and his disciples; a deep bond that draws the sheep close and enables him to care for them. Without this deep sense of intimacy and trust, none of the care and protection would be possible.

I think of the K-9 Unit officer who brought his German Shepherd Rikko to the 39-ers meeting this week. He talked about Rikko’s wonderful work in finding lost people, sniffing out drugs and chasing down bad guys. He talked about Rikko’s breeding and training, his disposition, all that it takes to get the job done. But he underscored the fact that Rikko only listens to him, he takes commands from no one else.

This is the way it works with dog training. I can assure you that our German Shepherds listen to Dana, the dog trainer in our family. They hear me and if what I am saying seems suitable, they might listen, if they are in the mood. But when Dana speaks, they listen.

Jesus says he speaks and his sheep know his voice. They trust him, they listen to him, they know he has their best interests at heart. Thus, they are willing to do what he asks them to do and they form a bond, a deep bond with him, like they do with no one else.

It is a bit like the attachment young children form with parents. Child psychologists tell us that early on in life children need to feel secure and to do so they form an attachment. If they are cared for well in these early months, they tend to grow up with a greater sense of self-esteem and self-reliance. If they experience inconsistent care, they tend to grow into more anxious and less secure adults. If they experience neglect or abuse, they tend to grow up with anger and mistrust.

We relate to God in similar ways. Early experiences of healthy attachment build trust in a loving God. Inconsistent experiences with God or church lead to ambivalent feelings, what someone has called “the push-pull of longing interspersed with resentment, weakness or guilt.” Abusive experiences with religion lead to doubt and mistrust. Jesus says he is the good shepherd whose sheep hear his voice and bond with him. We are the sheep or the sheepdogs who listen to his voice. And because he is such a good shepherd, we feel secure no matter what life brings.
There is one other thing Jesus says about his role as the good shepherd, perhaps the most important thing – he lays down his life for the sheep. My first tendency is to say that here Jesus leaves the metaphorical world. Most shepherds don’t die for their sheep. They might not run away when the wolf comes, they help fight it off, but they do not lay down their lives intentionally, as Jesus says he does. If the shepherd dies, who will be left to protect the sheep?

But the officer who brought Rikko told us that Rikko, the German Shepherd, would lay down his life for him. He knows this. And there have been a few Christian shepherds who have done the same for their sheep. Jesus’ death on a cross in all that it means for us is unique, but there are times when sheepdogs are called to follow in his path as a means of caring for and protecting the sheep.

Each year the Vatican publishes a list of pastoral workers killed. A priest and lay catechist from Papua New Guinea were killed while trying to reconcile tribal conflicts. John Ssenyonda, a missionary from Uganda who studied in the U.S., was abducted in April of last year while serving in Mexico among the drug traffickers. His body was discovered six months later in a mass grave. It seems he refused to baptize the child of a cartel leader and through his preaching condemned the drug trade and the violence it brings. The latest Vatican report includes pastoral workers who died while caring for people suffering with Ebola (Carmen Nanko-Fernandez, *Lectionary Homiletics*, April/May 2015, pp. 25-26).

Some shepherds do lay down their lives for their sheep. Few of us may be called to do so, but the principle of self-sacrifice is one that runs through so many of Jesus’ teachings that it is difficult to make a case for ignoring this claim. The author of 1 John says we know love by this, that he lay down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16). In the reading from Acts 4, Peter and John end up in prison because they won’t quit talking about Jesus. There just aren’t many places in scripture where playing it safe and taking care of number one have anything to do with Christian discipleship.

Whether we think of ourselves as shepherds, sheepdogs or sheep, we are a part of one fold, one family of people called to do whatever it takes to care for one another and keep one another from harm.
I'm not really invested in what you call me, but what we call Jesus matters. It speaks to his character and to the character of any community which bears his name. There are many images that help us understand who Jesus is and who we are. We will explore another one next week, the image of the branches and the vine found in John 15. But there is something very basic about this image, something central to our Lord's identity and our own. Jesus is the good shepherd and we are not only the sheep or the sheepdogs. We are a shepherding community, a caring family, people who listen to the master's voice, protect one another from harm and lay down our lives when necessary.