

## 240421 Belonging to the Good Shepherd

### Translation

I am the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sake of the sheep.

A hired servant, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep and flees.

Then the wolf seizes them and scatters them.

The servant flees because it is a hired servant and not someone who cares for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd.

**I know the ones that are mine and the ones that are mine know me,** just as my father knows me and I know my father.

and **I lay down my life** for the sheep.

I have other sheep which are not from this sheepfold.

It is necessary that I lead them also, and they will listen to my voice.

**They will become one flock with one shepherd.**

On account of this the father loves me - that **I lay down my life**

In order that I might take it up again.

No one takes it from me but I lay it down by myself.

I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it up again.

This is the commandment I received from my Father.

One afternoon when I was about 12 or 13 years old, I went with some friends to West Edmonton Mall. I think there were five of us, all from First Mennonite Church in Edmonton. After a bit of time hanging out in the Mall, we went to the men's bathroom and decided to play a joke on future toilet goers. We went into each stall, locked the door from inside, and then proceeded to climb out over the wall, leaving the

stall locked. We all thought it was very funny, until the security guard walked in while I was still draped over the wall of one of the stalls. He hauled us off to the security office and very seriously explained to us that we were banned from the mall for one month on pain of very serious consequences.

Although all of us found our prank very funny, none of us would have done such a thing if it wasn't for the others. A big part of why we were climbing over those bathroom stall walls was the desire to fit in with the others, to be part of the group. We had a longing to belong. It is a desire we all feel – the longing to belong. Sometimes in the desire to belong we do stupid things, like my prank at West Edmonton Mall, but a sense of belonging is important to us all.

Fast forward about ten years. I was living in Waterloo and had just finished my BA in history. I had little direction in my life that summer. Basically, I was planning to find some kind of job in Waterloo to pay off my student loans. Early that summer I received an unexpected phone call from a friend in Winnipeg. She was part of a household in Winnipeg, known as Grosvenor House, which tried to intentionally live out their Christian faith together as a community. One of the members of the house was moving away and they were looking for a new member. Would I be interested in moving to Winnipeg to join them?

In many ways I think that was the voice of God inviting me to a place of belonging. I was at loose ends, with little direction in my life

and certainly nothing to belong to. The possibility of joining Grosvenor house spoke to that deep place in my soul that longed to belong. I decided that I could find work in Winnipeg as easily as in Waterloo, so that summer I moved to Winnipeg and became part of an intentional community that has shaped my life. We ate meals together, worked together, and set aside an evening a week to spend together. We prayed for each other, thought together about what it meant to be a Christian, and tried to encourage each other to put our faith into action. We also made Grosvenor House mugs (*hold mine up*) and a Grosvenor House cookbook as signs and symbols of our belonging. Everyone who was part of Grosvenor House was an active member of a church and I became very involved at Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship after fairly sporadic church attendance during my university years. Belonging to Grosvenor House shaped me. It shaped my actions and it shaped my beliefs. Grosvenor House was an important part of coming again to belong to a church community and ultimately, to belong to God.

All of us have a deep longing within us to belong. Whether that's friendship groups, clubs, sports teams, community groups, or facebook groups, we all desire to belong. This is especially pressing for youth and it can lead in positive or negative directions. It can lead to good decisions or to bad decisions. But it is a **need** that we have: the need to belong.

We fill that need in many ways and by becoming part of many groups. Sometimes that is satisfying and fulfilling, as being part of Grosvenor house was for me. Sometimes we move right to the centre and belong fully to a group that shapes us in positive ways. But sometimes we remain on the fringes of a group, an outsider that never fully belongs. Or in our longing to belong we join a group that shapes us in negative ways or leads us to actions that are not our best.

The good news of the passage from John 10 that I read earlier is that we do have a place of belonging, a place that responds to that inner longing. We **do** belong in a place where we don't have to be on the fringe, a place more life giving than any club or team. At the centre of this Scripture passage is a sense of belonging. Ultimately we **belong** to Jesus, we **belong** to the Good Shepherd. Let me read again from vss. 14 and 15 in my own translation: "I am the Good Shepherd. I know the ones that **are mine** and the ones that **are mine** know me, just as my father knows me and I know my father." (John 10:14-15) I know the ones that **are mine**. Central to this Good Shepherd passage is the idea of belonging – we **belong** to the Good Shepherd.

The passage gives us some idea of what this means. First it means that we are known. "I **know** the ones that are mine." One of the gifts of belonging to Grosvenor House was that the members of that community got to know and love me in ways that few people outside of my family did. Part of our longing to belong is the longing to be known, deeply

and intimately. And then, in that knowing, to be loved for who we truly are. “I **know** the ones that are mine.” Jesus the Good Shepherd knows us in ways that we don’t even know ourselves. We belong to him and we are **known** by him.

Secondly, belonging to the Good Shepherd means that we are never, ever abandoned, in any circumstances. In danger or in safety, in good times or in bad, in sickness or in health, Jesus **never** leaves us to deal with things on our own. Our Shepherd is always there for us. Jesus makes this point by contrast with the hired servant. He says: “A hired servant, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and abandons the sheep and flees...The servant flees because it is a hired servant and not someone who cares for the sheep.” (John 10:12-13) The sheep do not belong to the hired servant and so the sheep are abandoned. With Jesus it is different. He is the Good Shepherd. The sheep belong to him. He **never** abandons them. We are never outsiders with Jesus. We are never alone.

And finally, belonging to the Good Shepherd means that we are loved – incredibly, wonderfully loved. This isn’t an unknowing love. This is a love that knows us deeply, understands us better than we understand ourselves, and then loves us beyond our comprehension. This is a shepherd that doesn’t just watch out for the sheep. He doesn’t just take care of them and protect them from danger. This is a shepherd that loves the sheep so much that he is willing to die for them if

necessary. “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life on behalf of the sheep.” (John 10:11) Isn’t that astounding? A Shepherd who loves his sheep so much that he is willing to die on their behalf? It’s a special thing to belong to **this** Shepherd, who knows us deeply and who loves us to our core.

Of course, we need to acknowledge and claim our place of belonging. We can’t be shepherded if we choose to ignore the shepherd and leave the flock. If we believe that we are not worthy to belong, or if we decide that we’d rather not belong, or if we believe other sheep who tell us that we aren’t part of **their** flock. Sometimes our independent streak trumps our longing to belong or we decide we would rather be part of another flock. Lutheran Pastor Edward Markquart has said that “one of the great deceptions of life and one of the great pretences of life, is that we are not sheep.” The reality is that we **are** sheep, we **are** in need of a shepherd, and we **do** belong to the one who knows us by name. First and foremost, we belong to Jesus the Christ.

There is an interesting line that perhaps helps us understand the expansiveness of this belonging. Jesus says “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” Jesus expands the circle beyond what anyone could have expected. And I think this can be a warning to us, to be really careful about limiting those who belong. I want to acknowledge that we can put up barriers to belonging, even to the Good Shepherd. Churches have not

always been stellar in this way. Even the close followers of Jesus were prone to try to control access to Jesus. I think of the story in Mark 10 of blind Bartemaus, who was sitting beside the road begging when Jesus went by. He shouted out: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Now there was a belief in that time that blindness was the result of sin in some way. And so the people around ordered Bartimaeus to be quiet and not bother Jesus. But he cried out even louder “Son of David, have mercy on me!” And Jesus called him over, talked with him, and healed him. Jesus had no patience for those who were blocking access to him and infinite patience for this man who many believed was a sinner. I think this has implications for how we do church. What are the barriers we put up that intentionally or unintentionally block access to Jesus? Are there ways that we perpetuate the myth that some people don’t have a place of belonging to the Good Shepherd? I think this might also have implications as we learn and talk about inclusivity at Shantz. One of the things I need to be constantly learning is about the barriers that I might unintentionally be creating through my lack of understanding.

But with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, there is belonging. The reality that each of us can find belonging with the Good Shepherd has considerable consequences for what we believe and how we behave. Just as becoming part of Grosvenor House shaped my beliefs and my actions, belonging to Jesus Christ shapes our beliefs and our actions. There is a traditional formula that is sometimes used to describe the

Christian life: believing, behaving and belonging. That is, first you believe in Jesus as your saviour, then you strive to behave like Jesus, and then you come to belong in the church. A while back there was an article in the Canadian Mennonite by Henry Neufeld where he took issue with this traditional formula. He argued that the order should be reversed. First you **belong**, then you behave, and then you believe. I think this is worth thinking about: Belonging, behaving and believing. Perhaps this order makes sense when we're talking about any group we become part of: First we belong to a group, then our behaviour is affected by the group we're part of, then we begin to believe what that group believes. What we **belong to** affects what we believe and how we act.

An example: I grew up in Edmonton. I quickly came to belong there. I was part of the group. I was an Edmontonian through and through. Now, there are a number of actions and beliefs that result from being an Edmontonian, but there's one action that I think defines belonging to the city of Edmonton: Cheering **for** Edmonton sports teams and **against** Calgary sports teams. Together with that is the belief that Edmonton is a great city to live in and Calgary is not. My beliefs and actions were so formed by belonging to the city of Edmonton that I still cheer for the Oilers and Elks and against the Flames and Stampeders, and I still can't understand why anyone would want to live

in Calgary. Our behaviour and beliefs grow out of our belonging. What and who we belong to affects who and what we become.

I think this has implications for how we do church. Perhaps the most important message to convey to our children, to newcomers, and to people on the fringes is that this is a place where you **belong**. You **belong** to the Good Shepherd and you **belong** to this flock. Perhaps those of us who feel that we are insiders need to strive to invite others to the centre. Perhaps those of us on the fringes need to experience and to know that in this flock and with this Shepherd we belong completely. Perhaps what we can most offer as a church isn't a set of beliefs or a way of acting, but rather a place of belonging. Not that beliefs and behaviour aren't important. But perhaps they can only truly grow out of a deep sense of belonging – to this flock and to this Good Shepherd.

Our inner longing to belong can only truly be met by an encounter with Christ. It can only be assuaged by abandoning ourselves to the intimate care of the Good Shepherd. Ultimately we belong to the one whose rod and staff comfort us in times of trouble, whose voice leads us on paths of righteousness, who restores our souls and removes our fear. We belong to the Shepherd who knows us intimately, who loves us deeply, and who refuses to abandon us. First and foremost we belong to Jesus the Christ. Thanks be to God. AMEN.