

## John 10:22-30

I think it's a good thing that for God's people it was an abomination to eat swine or even touch them, but there was no such law regarding sheep. If it had been the other way around; if sheep had been considered unclean animals but the people of God were allowed to raise hogs, how different wouldn't things be for us! Instead of Jesus holding a lamb in the picture window above our altar, He'd be holding a tiny pig. The 23rd Psalm would begin, "The Lord is my Hog Farmer..." One of our favorite hymns would be, "I Am Jesus' Little Pig." And every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter, instead of hearing a sermon about how we are sheep who love to stray, but Jesus tends us as a loving Shepherd, we'd hear about how we are vicious little pigs who bite and devour each other as we slop around in the mud.

Better to be a sheep than a pig. The picture, for us, is one which we are much more accepting of. And yet the picture we have formed in our minds is one which may not be very accurate at all. The lamb held by Jesus in the window behind me is very content. It is a perfect specimen--nothing wrong with it as far as we can see. If this is how we picture ourselves as Jesus' sheep, then we are not facing up to reality. In reality we sheep are bruised, often sick, sometimes bloody with scrapes, wounds, and sores. In reality we may walk with a limp or be missing a leg altogether. In reality we are far from content. Our minds are filled with concerns and our bodies are often exhausted and full of stress. And in reality is it not true that we are more apt to be wandering away from our Shepherd than to be held close, by Him, to His breast?

Better to be a sheep than a pig, we think. But pigs are much smarter than sheep. Pigs are aggressive, sheep are followers. Pigs can take care of themselves. They are not easy prey for wild beasts. They do not need someone constantly watching over them. Sheep do. If you were a pig then you would have no need for today's sermon, no need for the church, no need for a Shepherd. But you aren't a pig; you are a sheep. And being a sheep you, like me, have many issues in your life right now. You need, above all things, to be loved by your Shepherd, to be cared for by Him, and to listen as He speaks to you today.

Here is what Jesus says of His sheep: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand." There are four actions taking place here. Two that we do; two that Jesus does. We hear and follow. Jesus knows and gives. Now sheep become confused quite often, and being sheep, this happens with us. We have the tendency to turn these actions around. In our sinful confusion we see ourselves as the ones who know and give, and Jesus as the one who hears and follows. To be a sheep, we think, all it takes is for us to know who Jesus is and to give Him some of our time and money once in a while. He is the one who hears and follows. He hears us when we pray to Him now and then, and He follows us around to pull us out of trouble when we need help.

But that's utter confusion. We are Jesus' sheep not because we know Him, but because He knows us; not because of what we give to Him, but because of what He gives to us. We are Jesus' sheep because we hear His voice and follow Him, not the other way around. Little Graham Coleman was born a few days ago and will be baptized next month. What makes him a part of his family is not that he knows his mom and dad so well, but that they know him; not that he gives them anything at all (except dirty diapers), but that they give him everything--love and care, food and shelter. And because they give all these to him, he is learning to trust their voice and will follow them in love through life. We are the ones in God's family who hear and follow; Jesus is the one who knows us and gives us life.

Now on the surface it appears that these four actions follow in order. First we hear Jesus' voice. Then He knows us. Next we follow Him. And finally He gives us eternal life. But this is not so. All four actions are simultaneous. As we hear and follow He knows us and gives life to us. When a baby is at his mother's breast the mother speaks softly to her child while nursing. The infant hears his mother's voice. The mother knows her child as her very own. The child follows her leading to find milk. Drinking of that milk the mother is giving life to her child. All four actions, really, happen at the same time. And so with us. Jesus' sheep hear His voice. We follow that voice. And all the while He knows us as His dear sheep and from Him we are receiving life.

Now again, because sheep are often confused, and we are sheep, let's understand clearly something about these four actions. They are in the present tense. Jesus' sheep always are hearing His voice. Always He knows His sheep. Always they follow Him. Always He is giving life to them. But as confused sheep, we have the tendency to put these actions in the past tense and to say, "I heard Jesus' voice in the past, in Sunday School, Confirmation Class, in church a few times. And so even though I don't hear His voice in the present much today, because I heard His voice in the past I am His sheep." "And I followed Him for a while in the past, back when I was not as busy, and so even though I'm not much of a follower today in the present, I am His sheep."

But this is utter confusion. "My sheep," says Jesus, "did not just hear in the past and follow in the past...but they are always, in the present, hearing My voice and following Me."

Friend, it is no accident that you are here today. You are Jesus' sheep. Where the Shepherd is, that's where the sheep are found. Jesus made you His sheep in the waters of your baptism. He washed you and cleansed you, sins and all. Why? Because you are precious to Him; because He is merciful; because He died for you and chose you for His very own. But your Shepherd did not stop with your baptism. Through Christian parents, teachers, and pastors He taught you of His love and His truth. Through such people, sinners though all of us are, He brought, and brings, His voice to your ears. So when you heard mom and dad reading to you an Arch Book about Abraham, or your Sunday School teacher reading a lesson about King David, or when you hear Pastor Bell preaching to you from the pulpit about sin and grace, you recognize the voice of your Shepherd.

You never stop being a sheep, and so Jesus never stops knowing you as His own and giving life to you. He never tires of leading you with His voice. He never ceases to care for you. Are we perfect contented sheep like the sheep in the picture--no spots, or wrinkles, or unholy things about us? Not at all. We're picky sheep, critical sheep, judgmental sheep, lazy sheep, lustful and greedy sheep. We are sheep with an attitude. We are sheep with problems. But because you are Jesus' sheep, you are more than anything, forgiven sheep, holy sheep, sheep with hope, sheep who know where you are going--to heaven through Jesus.

And so that perfect little sheep in the picture window is how Jesus sees you. Not without problems, but problems that vanish in His love. Not without sin, but completely forgiven, innocent and blameless in His eyes. Not sheep without worries and concerns, but happy and content because He is your Shepherd. And look at that picture. It's Jesus' hand holding the sheep. "And no one," He says, "will snatch My sheep out of My hand." In Jesus you are safe. In Jesus your sins cannot accuse you; they are forgiven. In Jesus the devil cannot have you; your Savior defeated him for you. In Jesus heaven belongs to you now, today. It's not something you must earn. It's a gift. "I give My sheep," says Jesus, "eternal life." No pig ever had it so good. All this is yours, friend, because you are Jesus' sheep. Amen.

