

***It's Not the Sheep, It's the Shepherd – John 10:1-11***

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Here are a couple of stories that were in the news this week, stories illustrative of humanity's fallenness:

First, a man in Virginia who illegally caught and sold turtles across the United States has pleaded guilty to conducting a trafficking scheme that made him thousands of dollars and sent many of the animals to Asia, where they are in high demand as pets.

The man, Stanlee Fazi, 41, pleaded guilty in federal court to trafficking turtles from July 2017 to June 2020. During that time, he collected Eastern box turtles — which have bright yellow or orange markings on their cocoa-colored shells — and shipped them to buyers in the United States.

Many of the animals were then sold to people in Hong Kong and China, where the illegal pet turtle trade is booming. Turtle populations there are in decline because of their use in the pet trade, in Asian folk medicines and as food.

Mr. Fazi admitted that he had bound the turtles in socks and shipped them via FedEx from Fredericksburg, Va., making about \$12,700 in the scheme. He will be sentenced in July and faces up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

And then there was this story:

On the day of a special election in New Hampshire in April 2021, Michael Drouin posted a fake advertisement on Craigslist offering a free trailer and listed the phone number of Bill Boyd, a candidate for a state House seat.

Mr. Drouin thought he was playing a harmless practical joke, but it was no laughing matter to Mr. Boyd, who told the police that he received dozens of texts and phone calls in under an hour on the morning of April 13, 2021, before he shut off his phone.

Mr. Drouin was indicted in November 2022 on a felony charge of interference with election communications. On Monday, Mr.

Drouin, 30, pleaded guilty to the reduced charge of creating a false document, an election law offense, admitting that he knowingly interfered with Mr. Boyd's ability to use his cellphone on Election Day.

The charge is a misdemeanor, not a felony, but it still cost him his right to vote in the state. People who are convicted of a willful violation of the state's election laws lose their right to vote under the New Hampshire Constitution.

As crimes go, these two stories don't come close to the ones that report murders, rapes, and unjustified acts of war. Yet, they do reveal the human condition and our tendency to wander away from acts of goodness and kindness and toward those that hurt others or God's creation.

These stories are the exception rather than the rule when it comes to human behavior. But they certainly help us settle a debate as to which one—God or God's children—are able to best take care of us. Are we best off guiding ourselves to a better life? Or is this best left to God? These two news stories would seem to indicate the latter.

We should not minimize the potential good that human beings can display in being positive mentors and leaders of other people. There are countless stories of good work being done that far overshadow the bad ones. And yet, these stories remind us that left to our own devices entirely, we wouldn't get very far when it comes to advancing the cause of humanity.

With all the metaphors that Jesus uses in his teaching today from John 10, there should be no doubt as to who the shepherd and gatekeeper is. And when I refer to gatekeeper, I'm not referring to one that lets some people into the kingdom of heaven and keeps some out.

The term gatekeeper for this discussion is about who is the one who can best protect us—from ourselves at times and the outside forces that would threaten us.

It's good to remind ourselves once again of the obvious statement Jesus is making in these verses. He is the good shepherd and gatekeeper; we are the sheep.

Why didn't Jesus say, "I am the great teacher, you are my brilliant students. You kids can do anything you put your minds to. Study hard"? Or, "I am the great do-gooder, and you are all my valuable assistant little do-gooders, go do good"? Or, "I am the CEO in the front office, you are my second level managers out working the floor: look busy"?

No, what Jesus said was, "I am the loving, searching, seeking, self-sacrificial shepherd . . . you are the wayward, inept, wandering, lost, totally-dependent-on-me, sheep." As so many times with God's word, a seemingly sweet, reassuring little passage – "I'm the good shepherd; you're my, lost sheep" – is an assault on just about everything we believe about ourselves, a metaphorical affront to the way we enjoy thinking of ourselves.

Jesus says, "I'm the good shepherd." It would have been ludicrous for him to say, "I'm the good shepherd – now I want you sheep to get organized, take matters in hand, turn the gospel into a technique for self-improvement. No, what he said was, "I am the good shepherd; you are the sheep." And we know the IQ levels of sheep.

Then Jesus raises our definition of "good shepherd" up to the nth degree in saying, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." If Jesus could have merely improved the sheep, equipped the sheep, enlightened the sheep, that is, if he could have taught the sheep the key to saving themselves, by themselves, he would have never said, "The good shepherd not only loves the sheep but lays down his life for the sheep."

We are dependent on him, despite our good qualities. We can't have life without him. There's just too much waywardness within us.

One day, a college chaplain, on a dreary Monday, sat across from a young man who had, the weekend before, made a terrible

mistake (under the influence of alcohol, but no less terrible for that). He candidly detailed his misdeeds to the chaplain. And the chaplain responded, "What were you thinking?"

"How long have you been a college chaplain?" the student asked.

"Twelve, maybe 13 years," the chaplain replied.

"That long? I would have thought you would have learned more about students," he responded. "If I had been thinking I wouldn't have done what I did!"

"Surprisingly wise observation," said the chaplain.

Still, for another hour the chaplain berated him for his sorry behavior. Then the student said quietly, and with a sigh, "I just thank God that Jesus died for sinners – them that knows and them that don't know, just us sinners."

In our more honest moments, we know we are sheep – thoughtless, wayward, wandering sheep. Who is God? God is Jesus, the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for a bunch of wayward and wandering sheep. All that we dumb, wayward sheep know for sure is: "The Lord is my shepherd, he makes me to lie down, he leads me, he comforts me, prepares a table for me, anoints, follows me with goodness and mercy."

Again, I'm not one to completely negate our ability to do good. We're created in the image of God after all. We can do good, and it's been proven time after time.

But we should remember that the focus of this text today is not about the occasional good work we do. The focus of it and all of the gospels must really be on Jesus and who he is and what he does.

Jesus is the good shepherd; we are the merely the sheep.

Christ is the one who guides us as the good shepherd inside the gate. And inside the gate is protection—from ourselves and the dumb mistakes we make.

Christ is the one who has laid down his life for us. He is the one who has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

So often, you probably leave worship wondering how you are going to implement into your own life what you've heard. Or at least I hope so.

Today as you leave worship, I hope that you take with you one idea that really has nothing to do with what you should do. There is no action plan for you, other than to live your life in praise and thanks to the One who lovingly shepherds us when we are incapable of shepherding ourselves.

It's the good shepherd, Jesus Christ, who gets us safely behind the gate and shields us from all that would destroy us. It's the good shepherd, who when all else fails, lays down his life for us. It's quite the gesture.