

Acts 4:5-12 •
Psalm 23 •
1 John 3:16-24 •
John 10:11-18; 27-30

SERMON: April 21, 2024

MORE LIKE THIS

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ

I'm going to begin this morning by bragging about something. I want that to be understood at the outset: it's not humble bragging or false modesty or slipping self-admiration in under the radar, or anything subtle at all: it's outright bragging, preening, showing off. It's yielding to the sin of pride in order to provide an illustration for this morning's message, but it's at least not yielding to the far worse sin of false humility.

So, with that understood, here we go. A few months back I received an email from someone whose name I didn't recognize, who asked me if I was the Don Algeo who once taught philosophy at Kenyon College. (As an aside, for those of you who might not be aware of it, my first career was as a philosophy professor at a number of different institutions of higher learning.) Well, Kenyon College, which is a private liberal arts college in Ohio was my first job, and I taught there for three years before moving on.

Anyway, the man who sent me this email did so from an .edu domain so I knew it wasn't spam or phishing, and I responded that yes, that was and continues to be me.

When he emailed me back, the man identified himself as a philosophy professor at a fairly prestigious college in New York City. He said that he was on the verge of retirement now, and something had moved him to try to find me to express to me a word of gratitude. He said that many years before, he had taken a philosophy class from me at Kenyon College, and that it was as a result of taking that class that he

had decided to become a philosophy major, and then gone on to graduate school and his career in academia.

That was gratifying enough, of course, but then he went on to add something that really touched my heart. He said he could pinpoint the exact moment when his life changed. He had submitted a final paper to me as part of that class, and he said that at one point I had marked off a particular section, and written in the margin alongside that section: More like this. And he said that when he then reread that highlighted section, his eyes were suddenly opened to what philosophy really was, to how it was done, and what it could do, and he suddenly knew the direction he wanted his life to take. And he said that over the long years of his own teaching career, that was the remark he had himself written on the margins of countless students' papers: More like this. And he just wanted me to know.

We'll come back to this later.

The 23rd Psalm is the most familiar and beloved of the Psalms, perhaps even for many the most cherished selection from the whole Bible. It's the Biblical poem everyone knows, many even by heart, and it has served as the centerpiece of countless sermons and Christian ceremonies. But perhaps its very familiarity can lead us to overlook something truly profound about it, the fact that, as they say in literary criticism, its voice changes.

The first part of the psalm is written in the voice of the sheep: It begins: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters..." And the first section concludes, "I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff protect me."

This first section, in other words, invites the reader to acknowledge his or her relationship with God as like that of the sheep to their loving and reliable Good Shepherd, a relationship of complete trust and dependence.

But then, amazingly and beautifully, the voice changes to someone else altogether. "Thou preparest a table for me in the presence of mine enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup runneth over." This is no longer the voice of a sheep; it's the voice of someone who has been promoted into royal status and privilege. And this individual, the one speaking in the psalm, who was originally a sheep, is finally elevated even further, now into heavenly glory: "Surely goodness and mercy will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

What the psalm is teaching us, in other words, using the rustic imagery of shepherding familiar to its audience followed by the regal imagery of royalty and religion familiar to that same audience, is that the journey towards final and eternal relationship with God begins with and develops out of the attitude of simple, unwavering and unquestioning trust. We cannot have the latter without the former.

The image of the shepherd and his flock used to represent the relationship between God and His chosen people is found in many places throughout the OT, but it is only here, in the 23rd Psalm, that we find this extra layer of meaning added to it, that this relationship of obedient trust is only the opening stage of a much deeper, much more wonderful relationship.

Jesus was intimately familiar with the Jewish religious writings – they probably, in fact, comprised the entirety of His own education. And I strongly suspect that it was this new and extra layer of meaning we find in the 23rd Psalm that he incorporated into his own usage of the shepherd and his flock that we find in our lectionary reading, taken from the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John. So let's read it together now.

[John 10:11-18; 27-30](#)

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. ¹² But a ^[b]hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. ¹³ The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. ¹⁵ As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. ¹⁶ And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.

¹⁷ "Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father."

²⁷ My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. ³⁰ I and My Father are one."

27 My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life.

The Greek phrase that's translated 'eternal life' here doesn't just mean 'everlasting life.' It means 'the life that God leads'; the life that heaven both provides and nurtures. When Jesus promises those that follow his guidance the reward of eternal life, he is not promising them that they will remain sheep forever. On the contrary: he's promising them an elevation from being sheep.

We are not destined to remain sheep. Later on in John's gospel, in the great final discourse Jesus offers to his disciples before leading them on his last night of life out into the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus returns to the commitment to lay down his own life for them, as the shepherd will do for his flock.

13 Greater love has no one than this," he tells them, "than to lay down one's life for his friends." But he then proceeds to that same extra layer of meaning that we found in the 23rd Psalm, only this time put in the imagery of friendship with Jesus.

14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends..." No longer will you be sheep, He might as well have said; you will instead join me in the company of shepherds.

Saint Paul, in his great letter to the Romans, makes the same point using yet different imagery.

***12**Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. **13**For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. **14**For as many as are led by the Spirit of God," – who follow our good shepherd, relying on his wisdom, on his strength, on his devotion to our well-being – "these are sons of God. **15**For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba,**[e]** Father." **16**The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, **17**and if children, then heirs— heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ... (Romans 8) .*

No longer will you be sheep, Saint Paul might instead have written. You will inherit the privilege and responsibilities of being the shepherd.

Let's return to my former student, who is now himself an elderly man (which gives you some notion of how old I am.) I had a very undistinguished teaching career, to put it mildly. I was dismissed from that Kenyon job because I tried to form a faculty union – this was back in my old left wing days. And my later positions

produced very little of lasting academic value. But many many years later, I did have one moment of pride, and that came when I opened that email and learned that, following my instruction, someone had gone on to a new, and interesting, and productive life.

And just so, I suspect, it will be a proud moment for Christ – perhaps, if I may say so with reverence, **the** proudest moment – if and when each one of us, by following his instruction and giving it application in our own lives, follows him as sheep through the heavenly gates, because we will then emerge on the other side as His brothers and sisters, as joint heirs of our Father’s kingdom.

If you love me, keep my commandments, Jesus once said, not seeking his own glory, but seeking ours.

We are not destined to become heavenly sheep; we become sheep, in order to achieve our glorious destiny. In following Christ on the earthly journey today, we learn to forge our own heavenly paths both in this life and in the life to come. We learn the true value of the model he provided for us, along with the instruction: More like this.

And so, heavenly Father, our prayer for today is that You help us swallow our pride and accept with an understanding will that our role as sheep following our Good Shepherd, as disciples of our Rabbi, is not that we may remain sheep or disciples, but that we may, through eternity, work together with him as friends and family, praying together, in His name.