

I know there aren't as many farmers this morning as were around Jesus. They understood when he used farming pictures; but maybe we can too. Picture a big field with a fence all the way around. Inside that fence are a thousand cows belonging to two farmers. The cows look alike. How to tell which cows belong to which farmer? Something must mark the cows apart. That's where the brand comes from. It's a way of marking the animals in order to tell them apart.

Now imagine that all the people of the world are like sheep existing within a fence. Physically we all look different but deep down every one of us are the same. Every person belongs to one of two spiritual beings. Because we can't tell the groups apart we might worry these spiritual beings can't either. We wear no brands that mark us belonging to one or the other. How do we know who we belong to?

Jesus was answering a demanding question of the Jews in the gospel, but he has more to say than just yes or no. Jesus continues with the same illustration he used previously and the Jews continue with the same hatred they had previously. Through it all you learn something about who you belong to...

**You are the Good Shepherd's sheep**  
**Listen to the one who knows you**  
**Follow the one who blesses you**

Jesus was pacing back and forth in the temple when the angry Jews surrounded him. Just two months before they had been steaming mad. Jesus had the nerve to compare himself, actually equate himself with God the Father. What was worse, his teaching was dividing the Jews. Some wanted to listen and others wanted nothing to do with him. If they wanted to keep power division wasn't good. It had been two long months, but it was time to end this.

They demanded answers. ***"How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."*** It almost sounded like they needed to know for their own sanity. Like kids asking their parents whether their going for ice cream later or not, they just have to know. But the Jews weren't really in suspense. They knew what Jesus had said previously. On at least five different occasions Jesus had interacted with them and done impressive miracles in front of them which they had denied. On those five occasions, each time ended with them either scratching their heads in wonder or picking up stones to kill him. Their demand was merely so they had something definite to take the appropriate action.

Scour the words of Jesus and you won't find him ever saying, "I'm Jesus, the Messiah." He comes close a time or two, but it's always in private and it's always a 'yes' response to someone else's question. Even his disciples never heard it clearly. Yet Jesus responds to the Jews, ***"I did tell you..."*** Every time he was with them, every time he was teaching in the temple, every time he was healing he was telling them. Other people saw and listened, why not these Jews. Jesus answers that, ***"...but you did not believe."*** He did tell them he was the Messiah by what he said and did, but it was their fault they did not listen and believe.

You've heard last week about the ash cloud over Europe from the volcano. The airlines say the government was too cautious canceling flights in the last days hurting their business. Who do you listen to, the government saying it was too dangerous or the businesses saying it wasn't? What if an airliner had flown through it and crashed, then would people believe? Who do you listen to, was Jesus the Messiah or not? We've seen the empty tomb, heard prophets of the Old Testament proclaiming these things centuries before, and Jesus speaking with authority and compassion. No lack of evidence. But is it enough? Might we get a face to face encounter like Thomas demanded? Could we get a walk and talk like the Emmaus disciples? When we don't get those we are seeing but not listening. Doubt creeps in. We don't make hard commitments in case new evidence pushes us another way. Doubt stopped the Jews from listening and it stops us too. Doubt and not listening stops us from being part of the Good Shepherd's sheep.

Even in a crowd children have the ability to pick out their parents' voice. Children learn that voice rather quickly. It's a soothing comforting sound. Our Good Shepherd's voice is no different for us. ***"My sheep listen to my voice; I know them..."*** All this talk of sheep relates to you. The Good Shepherd calls out and we who belong to him listen and are comforted. He speaks to you through the gospel. The Bible stories about his death and resurrection show your Savior. You are sheep of the Good Shepherd.

Shepherds know their sheep. Our Good Shepherd knows us. More than just a familiarity, he knows every part of us. He knows what's best for us at this moment. He knows when buying that home will be too much for you and when it's the right move. He knows when it's time to go to the doctor and when it's okay to just rest at home. He knows when investing is a wise choice and when it's foolish. More than earthly help, he grants you eternal life right now. In love Jesus acknowledges we belong to him and he belongs to us. We're his by the shedding of his blood. In love he watches over us, leads us, and keeps us safe until he brings us to the perfection of heaven forever.

Part of the danger for young child is the trust factor. We have to teach our children to say no to strangers. Little kids who haven't been taught that lesson might learn the hard way that not everyone calling them is someone to be followed. Jesus warns us the same way. Not everyone who calls to us is someone to be followed. As sheep follow only their shepherd, we're to listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd. When we hear it, follow the one who blesses us.

These Jews were already outside the kingdom of God. Jesus said, **“You do not believe because you are not my sheep.”** He did not say, “Because you are not my sheep you cannot believe.” They had removed themselves from the Good Shepherd’s protecting care. They were unbelievers who didn’t want to follow the Messiah at all. Not following is sinful. It means rejecting him and indicates separation from God. Like hearing the message to treat your body like a temple of the Holy Spirit but then going out and getting drunk. It’s rejection and threatens to put you outside the Good Shepherd’s sheep. Like knowing God’s Word says foul language is wrong but going out and using it anyway. It’s sinful rejection and can put you outside of the Good Shepherd’s sheep.

No Jew would deny that God the Father had power. No honest person here can deny it either. Jesus has the same power. His power gives us security. The Good Shepherd’s power is so great **“no one can snatch them out of my hand.”** Jesus says God the Father’s power is so great that **“no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”** Sheep like you and me that belong to Christ will never be taken away from him. You rest securely in the hands of your Savior and your heavenly Father.

Now free from fear of being lost, free from worry over whether or not you believe enough, free from the threats of worldly evils you can pick out the voice of your Savior, your Good Shepherd. Hearing him clearly you can follow him closely. You can do what he does and say what he says. When he heals you can be a friend to those in need. When he asks disciples to share his holy name you can find people to tell and tell them. When he asks for faithfulness you can raise your kids to know Jesus, support them financially and emotionally. You can own a business, retire and travel, or golf even on Sunday afternoons. Following our Good Shepherd isn’t painful work, rather joyous opportunity. We’ve heard the voice now let’s follow where he leads.

Sometimes the pictures of Scripture are hard to understand because we’re so far removed from those experiences. The picture of the Good Shepherd is not one. We cherish this picture because we get it. Shepherds call their sheep, our Good Shepherd calls us. Sheep listen for the voice of their shepherd; we listen for the voice of our Good Shepherd. Shepherds are blessings for their sheep; our Good Shepherd is a huge blessing for us. Through him we have life now and life eternal someday in heaven. Through him we believe in God the Father. Through him we can call ourselves sheep of the Good Shepherd.