

As I think of all the food I waste, it is embarrassing to realize in Jesus' day, the loss of one lamb or a goat meant children would go hungry or there would be nothing to barter for wheat or fabric. The task of a shepherd was not just to watch, but to protect the flock for the sake of other lives. Shepherding was a life and death vocation. It was a difficult, dangerous commitment. especially if fending off a wild animal or band of thieves.

Jesus compared his task as that of a shepherd who knew he would die on the job, so sheep in his care would be protected. He proclaimed he was ready to sacrifice his life for those he loved. That is more than most can imagine. We have enough difficulty donating time or money that we would rather not give up. It is difficult to consider giving up a kidney for a stranger, or a promotion so someone else doesn't lose their job.

There are so many occupations and situations where sacrifice is the name of the game – where surrender and not reward is the motivation. Think of soldiers, street cops, firefighters, or Peace Corps volunteers. And the shortcomings of a few, to be engaged in such service involves, from the beginning, a willingness to die to protect others. It really does!

We understand the difference between one who sees herself as servant and one who feels she deserves to be served. We know sacrifices are easier when someone else is doing them for us than for us to do for someone else.

Consider the many sacrifices others have chosen just to allow you to be you. you have chosen to make? And remember sacrifices you have chosen, only because you cared or shared. Now ... could you imagine surrendering your life so that someone else wouldn't die? I don't know if I could really do that. What about you? Such an ultimate sacrifice is one few are called upon to make, and yet many have. We know that is exactly what Jesus has done for us.

Most of us have never seen a shepherd, much less understand what that vocation entails, but Jesus lived with people who did that for a living. Jesus' audience knew the owner of the sheep would fight to the death to protect his flock while someone working only for wages would have difficulty making such a sacrifice. Jesus used the word good because so many pretended to shepherd but weren't serious about their task.

He was restating the complaints of the Old Testament prophets, who used the term "shepherd" to talk about the role of priests and kings –who were supposed to care for their people but often didn't. The prophets constantly lamented the pain of selfish and evil shepherds who had led Israel astray or let them down. They were shepherds in name only.

Jesus announced he was a different kind of leader. HE wasn't in if for the limelight or the glory. He was willing to surrender his life for the flock and know ahead of time that would be exactly the price he would have to pay. He accepted that his death would be necessary for us to have life.

In announcing ahead of time that he would die for all, whether deserving or not, a new kind of love was being poured out for every life that would ever live. This good shepherd would bring good news to all.

We love the shepherd image if it means someone is caring for us! But what about those who have never known that feeling? Who don't know what they are missing? What about those who don't know they are part of the flock, don't feel loved, and maybe have never even felt real love? Jesus warned about wolves that snatch lives while hired hands run to safety and leave sheep to die. Just think about all the ways that evil tries to snatch lives today, through hatred, through envy, through cancer or murder or the selfishness of self-love. And who will save the sheep?

We long to have shepherds in our lives. As little children, there was no better feeling during a thunderstorm to know Mommy or Daddy were near! When danger or terror strikes, it is comforting to know that a firefighter or cop will be available to serve and protect. The same holds true for teachers, crossing guards, paramedics, nurses, and even friends.

Not only has Jesus shared the ultimate sacrifice for us, but he calls us to do the same for each other. To become "good shepherds" for those who he places into our care. (And that list might be bigger than you think.)

When my first child, Katie, was born, I was overwhelmed with love and had never imagined how easy it was to give so much to one so little. When it was time for my son, Mark, to be born I worried I wouldn't have enough love to go around – that I would have to love Katie less in order to have love for Mark, or that Mark would never be loved as much as Katie. And so, it went as Chris and Abby joined in our journey as a family.

In the end, I discovered as all parents learn, that love grows. Our love for all of our children was always greater than we ever imagined we were capable of! When someone feels that call to love, it matters not whether the flock is small or large, shepherding becomes a lifestyle and embraces all. What other words for such love is there than miracle?

Jesus brings us into his family business and calls us to learn shepherding for his flock. The world is full of pain and anger because there is so little love and sacrifice. It is filled with people seeking nourishment, acceptance, and love. What if each would see every neighbor, co-worker, or stranger as a long lost relative, or one of Jesus' lambs?

Jesus told his disciples that love was more than words, it revealed itself in truth and action. The point was so that other will learn the truth of God's love. He said the most important commandment was to love one another!

How great to have a shepherd who loves and cares for me like I am his! But if that love has any meaning, I must love and care, like a shepherd for others, just as Jesus has for me! If Jesus was willing to give up even his life to set me free, how can we do any less! Such is the love that separates good shepherds from those who are shepherds in name only.

Giving our lives for someone might not mean to die but surrender in the service of those who I am called to care for, love, and serve. The question is not really WHO would you die for, but who will you live for?

(seeber)