

Sheep Among Wolves

John 10:11-18

1 John 3:16-24

Do you remember the cartoon with a Wiley Coyote look-a-like called Ralph, the wolf, and Sam, the sheep dog? There were only a few made.

They would start out from their respective homes –in one they were neighbors, and in another they actually shared the same house. In any case, they would meet at the time clock mounted on a tree. They would punch-in their time cards and greet each other before parting company and going to their respective stations, awaiting the starting whistle for their shift to begin.

Sam, the sheep dog, went to his post on a cliff and took his position. Ralph, the wolf, true to his nature, would ready his latest strategy for stealing sheep. Sam, the sheep dog, never seemed too sharp with his eyes covered over with hair. On the other hand, Ralph, the wolf, always seemed nimble, sharp, and aggressive.

Sam, the sheep dog, would sit patiently at his post, seeming to look over the flock through the mat of hair over his eyes. Ralph would try one scheme after another attempting to steal some sheep. But no matter how hard he tried, it seemed that poor Ralph's plan was always thwarted by Sam, the sheep dog, at the last moment. Sam always seemed to be one step ahead of Ralph, the wolf.

As the day drew to a close just before the whistle blew, Ralph, the wolf, would pull out all the stops and would seem to have Sam, the sheep dog, beaten at last. But then the whistle would blow and everything stopped as the two headed for the time clock. Sam consoled his foe, Ralph, the wolf, "Better luck next time, Ralph." And Ralph would respond, "Well, you can't win them all."

What was intended to be striking was the normality of their occupations, sheep dog as protector, wolf as predator. For each of them, it was their job, it was what they did, it was their role in life. It was their daily routine, just like the office worker or the mechanic or the saleswoman or the teacher or the construction worker. It was normal and natural.

We can easily see Sam, the protective sheep dog, and his role equivalent on our society, the law enforcement officer on patrol. We have a more difficult time imagining the predator who also works full time, works a particular shift, and does this predatory job day-in and day-out.

It shows up in scripture in a sense. The word "sheep" appears 220 times in the Bible. The word "wolf" only 6 times, and "wolves" only 8 times, and often coupled opposite sheep in the predator-prey context. Lions and leopards are also common, but they mean different things and appear in varied contexts. The wolf is the one who is truly and consistently cast as the predator, yet we don't hear that much about the

wolves. That can leave us with a weak understanding of the predators who are dutifully working every day to prey upon the sheep, and not just in the cartoon world.

As our scripture passages remind us this morning, there is the shepherd who stands between the sheep and the wolves. The first passage from John's gospel is probably familiar, part of a longer monologue where Jesus discusses how he is the Shepherd for the flock of God's people. The passage before today's reading was concerned with thieves whom the sheep wouldn't follow because they recognize the voice of the shepherd.

Our passage is concerned with the hireling who is not truly committed to the protection of the sheep, who flees at the sight of the wolf, abandoning the sheep. The hireling's indifference puts the sheep at risk, like the boy on the cover who is asleep while the sheep have moved off into the distance.

Of course, we've had one of those few uses of the word "wolf." Interpreters spend a lot of time talking about the sheep, the Shepherd, and the hireling, but hardly mention the wolf. Since it is a metaphorical play of images, you might think that some effort would be made in understanding the wolf, too. I consulted several commentaries and not single one made any attempt to understand the wolf or the predator.

The passage turns to Jesus as the Good Shepherd whose voice is known to the sheep, and to whose voice the sheep will listen. It closes with the declaration by Jesus how he lays down his life for his sheep on his authority, laying it down and taking it back up again.

But what about the wolf?

One clue may be to look at the passage that likely inspired this whole metaphor, Ezekiel 34, which surely served as a model for what was produced about the sheep and the shepherds in John's gospel. You'll recall that there how the prophet Ezekiel repeats God's word, prophesying against the shepherds of Israel – the kings and generals and elites. They have exploited the sheep, in essence consuming them, as it says in 34:3: *You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep.* We don't hear explicitly about the wolves, but it comes close in verse 8 as God's frustration with the worldly shepherds comes to its peak: *My sheep have become prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild animals, since there was no shepherd; and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep ... I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, so that they may not be food for them.* By the end, you'll recall that God declares that God is taking over, that God will become their True or Good Shepherd.

From Ezekiel 34, we can tell that the predators are the ones who have no genuine interest in the sheep apart from what they can take from the sheep for their own benefit. They don't care about the sheep and dispose of them as soon as they've gotten all that they can from them. That sounds like it could apply to wolves, doesn't it?

Thanks to Ezekiel, we can fairly identify the wolves as the ones who prey upon people, upon situations, upon organizations, using opportunities to exploit, extract, and extort whatever they can for their own benefit, even if it's harmful or, yes, fatal. The sheep have been objectified, like a cow or a chicken that provides what it does until it's slaughtered. Sheep are expendable, only existing to serve the present need; nothing more.

If we have a better grasp of the wolfish behavior and attitude, we see the opposite now being portrayed in the passage from John's First Letter. Following a major theme in First John, the passage is concerned with understanding the dimensions of precious and sacrificial love that characterize Jesus and should characterize Jesus' followers. That sacrificial love – *agape* love – is directly opposite what we just reviewed regarding the wolves. The wolves would never lay down their life for another; they are in the role of taking resources, taking life, possessing all that they can **for themselves**. Jesus is the one who lays down his life, which is then followed with the instruction, *we ought to lay down our lives for one another*.

That's the first tough one for us. It's one thing for Jesus to lay his life down for us; it's a whole other thing for us to lay down our lives for each other. Oh, we'd do it, of course ... right?

Here's the second tough one for us. *If anyone has worldly possessions and sees his brother [or sister] in need, but has no pity ... how can the love of God be in [them]?* In case there are any weasels reading the passage closely, it is implicit that one would **share** those worldly possessions to benefit and minister to one in need. (A literal reading might suggest that "pity" alone was sufficient. Nah-nah.) The author regards such a failure as indicative that God's love means nothing, that God's grace is unappreciated, and that this sister or brother is, in fact, estranged from God, out of good relationship and standing, not really a serious follower of the Lord at all. Would it be too harsh to call this one a "wolf"?

After emphasizing love must be expressed not in words and posturing, but with actions and genuine concern, John explains how this reflects whether the believer "belongs to the truth." The next phrase is another tough one; *and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts and God knows everything*. Here, "if our hearts condemn us" is an expression that seems rather odd. Somehow we're lacking in good and worthy spirit and conduct as followers of the living Lord, but we set our hearts at rest before God, because God is greater than that. Okay, that sounds good; God is greater than our sinfulness and would graciously minister to us, I guess.

But verse 21 says: *Dear friends, if our hearts do **not** condemn us, we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask*. What just happened? How can it say that if our hearts **do** condemn us, it's okay – God will take care of it, and if our hearts **don't** condemn us, it's okay; we have confidence before God? Something isn't quite right.

It turns out that the first expression - *we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us* – applies to those who are self-judging harshly and finding fault unnecessarily; folks who are overdoing it and being scrupulous. Those folks' self-condemnation gets overturned by the love and justice of God. Then, if we aren't messed up by scrupulousness, *we have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask*.

The passage concludes with a two-fold command: to believe in Jesus, and to love one another as Jesus commanded.

The shepherd is defined by love, not mere affection but sacrificial love, a Jesus love that is gracious, that brings life.

The wolf is defined by taking, seizing, exploiting, and by death; the wolf has a sinful disregard for the life and well-being of the other whose only purpose and presence is conceived in selfish and self-serving terms.

Our passages point out the difficult proposition of following Jesus, our risen Lord. As his love was sacrificial, so our love for one another must reflect that sacrificial love. As his love led him to give all things for love of God and love of the sheep – his sisters and brother – so our love must stand against the wolves.

My experience has told me that we aren't accustomed to thinking about love this deep and powerful. And we aren't accustomed to standing against the wolves. More like the hireling, we're apt to run for cover when the wolves show up. We aren't accustomed to genuine sacrifice as an act of faithfulness and devotion. We like the other stuff that's less demanding and easier. We like casting the wolf as Satan, a force that is hard to specify, who is wily and spiritual. We don't like naming the wolves that stalk the sheep in our own society. But they're ever present, like the cartoon wolf who goes to work every day, side by side with the sheep dog, well-known and quite familiar. Unlike the cartoon, the wolves in our midst are quite successful.

We're reminded that the only weapon of the faithful follower of the Lord is not the crook or the staff, the strength or the conviction, but the love of Jesus that overcomes, and conquers, and brings justice, peace, and new life.