The Shepherd and the Steward

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A Matter of Ownership

Have you ever noticed how emphatically the Good Shepherd claims ownership of the sheep in the narrative of John 10? He “calls his own” (v.3); he brings out his own” (v.4); “I know my sheep…am known by my own” (v.14); “I lay down my life for my sheep” (v.15); and “other sheep I have” (v.16). After reading this narrative there remains absolutely no question about who owns the sheep! This is a collection of expressions from the Good Shepherd that communicates ownership way beyond the commercial level—but passionate personal ownership of something so valuable that he would go to the extreme of giving his life for them. This Shepherd doesn’t simply stand at the door; he is the door (v.7) which means that anyone or anything that seeks to harm his own will have to go through him first. And that is not going to happen! This is ownership strengthened by deep and committed love.

The Risk of Stewardship

This Good Shepherd engages stewards—under-shepherds—to assist in feeding, growing, and nurturing the sheep. This is risky; risky because the only way the steward can effectively serve is for the sheep to learn to associate the steward’s voice with that of the Shepherd. They must assume that the qualities of the steward mirror the qualities of the Shepherd and will follow the steward even as they trustingly follow the Shepherd. The risk is in the assumption: same character, same commitment, and the same love that stands firm even to the point of death. This risk is far greater than the risk posed by the thief who tries to covertly gain entrance to the fold (vss.1, 8) because the thief has to take the sheep by force and is thus limited to one or at the most two which is about all one person could carry away. The steward has the trust of the entire flock.

The Unfaithful Steward

The narrative describes this risk by telling of the unfaithful steward (hireling) (vss. 12, 13) who claims no ownership—only remuneration. The hireling views the sheep as objects at the center of a transactional relationship between himself and the Shepherd. The hireling functions not on the basis of commitment but of compliance that is limited in terms of time, energy, and risk to self. As such the sheep are safe and nurtured only to the extent of the limits he sets on the working relationship with the Shepherd. While watching the sheep which have trustingly followed his voice out to feed, he notices that several wolves have slid their heads cautiously out of the obscurity of the forest to weigh the possibilities and the risk of having mutton for lunch. The hireling quickly weighs his risk (not the sheep’s) and comes to the conclusion that this scenario exceeds his allowable risk and runs—abandons the flock while muttering, “I don’t get paid enough for this!” The sheep are scattered while some are caught and devoured. This is the risk the Good Shepherd assumes when entrusting the sheep to stewards.

The Faithful Steward

John doesn’t record any direct counsel in this tale of the Good Shepherd regarding the qualities of a faithful steward. He allows the wisdom of the greatest storyteller to activate our minds and creativity in building a mental model of the faithful steward. We might conclude that the faithful steward—committed, loving, faithful—is everything that the hireling isn’t, but unfortunately that only takes us...
so far. The hireling doesn’t own the sheep and neither does the faithful steward. This begs the question whether the faithful steward simply “acts” like an owner and if so, where does the motivation to do so come from? Can the faithful steward sustain the act long enough to be declared bondable because he has demonstrated low-risk behavior as a steward? Will such a steward be able to stand the test when he notices the black, wet muzzles of the wolf pack emerging from the cover of darkness to sniff the scent of the flock? Will his sense of self in the context of a lack of ownership allow him to lay his life on the line for the sheep?

David, the shepherd, demonstrated the passionate committed behavior expected of a faithful under-shepherd in his encounter with the “lion and bear” (1 Sam 17:34-36). The encouragement this story brings is that David does not identify himself as the owner. He engages both predators at great risk to his life in order to save a sheep that was not his own. The important key that we discover in this tale of courage is that David identifies the sheep as “his father’s sheep” (v. 34) and thus we discover the motivating factor for his willingness to risk himself for the sheep—he acted like an owner because of his relational identity to his father. The sheep had value because of their value to the father and by extension they became valuable to him.

I experienced this reality as a young man while living and working on our family farm in rural Missouri, USA. While working alone one afternoon in the summer of my 16th year, I heard the frantic barking of dogs coming from the pasture where my father kept his sheep. I immediately acted on my fear that feral dogs were attacking the sheep. I took my rifle in hand and ran toward the sheep only to discover my worst fears; sheep were lying dead and mutilated, some wounded and exhausted. My efforts drove the pack of dogs away but not before they inflicted significant loss among the sheep. At one point a wounded dog attacked me rather than escaping, and that very personal encounter has remained a clear memory these many years later. Another memory that has stayed with me is the flash of thought and regret that ran through my mind when I looked at each of those dead or dying sheep. My father worked so hard to care for our family and my mind calculated every sheep lost by dollar value, which translated to hours of hard work for him. “The commitment to the sheep is found in the relationship to the Father.”

The Good Shepherd as Steward

In verse 15 the Good Shepherd connects himself and his attitude toward the sheep with his Father. The Good Shepherd’s emphatic declaration of ownership and commitment to the sheep is bound up in his relationship with the Father. “As the Father knows me, even so I know the Father, and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Jesus was not only the Good Shepherd, he was also the Good Steward and as such a role model—or rather, the role model—for all who would serve as under shepherd of His flock. The commitment, the character, and the competency to serve emanates from our relationship with the Father—the owner of all we are and all we possess in trust. As non-owners we are distinguished from the hireling by this reality and because of this reality, by God’s grace, we should never run from danger that threatens His flock nor should we weigh the benefits to self before considering the needs of those entrusted to us. Like the Good Shepherd, we should be ready to lay it all on the line for those that are his. We are stewards of His people.