

April 22, Easter 4B (Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18)

## The "jobsworth" and the good shepherd.

by [David Heim](#) in the [March 28, 2018](#) issue

The British have coined the term *jobsworth* to describe a person who won't lift a finger to do more than the bare minimum their job requires. Ask jobsworths to exert themselves and they'll decline, saying, "It's more than my job's worth." A jobsworth frustrates colleagues and casts a cloud of lethargy over the workplace.

The worldview of the jobsworth is directly opposed to the one at the heart of 1 John. Whereas the jobsworth looks out only for oneself and stays within the narrow confines of the job description, the writer of 1 John calls on community members constantly to look beyond themselves and even be ready to "lay down [their] lives for each other" (3:16).

As annoying and unattractive as the jobsworth can be, the attitude raises some fundamental questions: What *is* a job worth? What makes it worth investing time and energy in this project or that one? To what should we be ready to give our lives? And aren't there demands on our soul or integrity to which we rightly say, "That's more than the job's worth"?

A jobsworth makes an appearance in the good shepherd discourse of John 10. In the NRSV he's called a "hired hand." This hired shepherd is only in it for the paycheck and he doesn't really care about the sheep, so when the situation calls for him to exert himself, he runs away.

Jesus the Good Shepherd explodes the jobsworth syndrome. Jesus is in full solidarity with the ones he's come to work with. He doesn't distance himself from the hazards of the job or the dangers that the flock faces. He shares in those dangers and even lays down his life to defend the flock. Nor can Jesus be construed as a savior for hire, as if he had to be induced to carry out a divine assignment. He is totally identified with God's shepherding mission.

No wonder that in times of crisis people turn to Jesus the Good Shepherd, just as they reach at such moments for the words of Psalm 23. The message is not only that there's a shepherd who can point out paths that lead through dark valleys. What lifts hearts and sparks courage in hospital beds, waiting rooms, and funeral homes is the message that there's a shepherd who walked the darkest paths himself and marked a trail for the rest of us to follow.

It's the witness of that shepherd that enables us to invest in the flawed institutions we work in. It's because Jesus the Good Shepherd has invested unreservedly in our lives that we are released from the jobsworth syndrome. We are free to invest in the love of neighbor and the care and protection of creation. We are free, too, to challenge workplaces when they undermine the flourishing of neighbor and creation—or our own well-being.

The problem in our work lives is not so much that a job's not worth the effort; it's that, in God's eyes, our jobs are worth more than we can imagine. Each task and relationship is an opportunity either to encourage one another in faith and hope and the celebration of creation or to undermine that faith, hope, and joy.

Unity in mutual self-giving is the great theme of the Johannine texts. The flock of believers is fused with Jesus the Good Shepherd and through Jesus fused with God. It's all the more striking, then, that Jesus upsets the coziness of the flock by proclaiming in John 10:16 that there is another flock in another fold that he is equally compelled to lead.

In context, Jesus is speaking of his mission to the gentile world, but the message resonates further. It speaks to our encounters with those who show up at church and seem to have come from a different world or heard Jesus speak in a different accent. Whenever we become fond of our community, Jesus reminds us that he's equally committed to those outside it. And he suggests that those outside our fold are fully equipped to hear what he has to say: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."

The historian of Christian missions Andrew Walls discerns a peculiar pattern in church history. Christian believers seem compelled to move toward the periphery of their worlds. The geographical center of faith has moved from Jerusalem to Syria to southern Europe to northern Europe to the North Atlantic to the Southern Hemisphere. To keep up with the new people Jesus aims to bring in, believers have

to learn to inhabit different cultures and look at Christ in new ways. Christianity, Walls suggests, has a bias for the periphery.

A correlative seems to operate at the local level. When congregations look to places of vitality in their own life, they are likely to think first about their ministries at the margins of the church or where members are encountering people who are challengingly different. Often the people who don't belong to our own fold and hear Jesus' voice in unfamiliar ways are the ones best able to help us hear it and understand it afresh. Jesus Christ continues to explode the jobsworth syndrome, leading us to expand our own job descriptions and find new dimensions of Jesus' work—and to find that our labors in that direction are always worth it.