

Feeling Sheepish 20
John 10:1-10
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It's a scientific fact that sheep are not the smartest animals in the world. A farmer once said that God created sheep to make chickens look smart. And yet, sheep are one of the most prevalent animals in the Bible. Think of the 23rd Psalm Cyndi read and how it employs this imagery. And then the passage from John where Jesus compares himself to a shepherd. So, let me draw this conclusion, and you're not gonna like it. Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my shepherd." Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." That means, but inference, that if Jesus is the shepherd, somebody's gotta be the sheep. Can I get a B-A-A? We're sheep. No less authority than the Bible compares us to these slobbering, smelly, noisy animals. That's not how I like to think of myself, although those adjectives probably are more fitting than I care to admit. But the Bible's pretty clear on this one: we're sheep, and we are called to follow the shepherd.

So, are we? Do we? I heard a story about a friend who owned sheep. This person usually had a dog herd the sheep where they needed to go, but one day she decided to do it herself. She was moving the sheep from one field to another, so she opened the gate between the two fields and waited for the sheep to walk through. Instead, the sheep just stood there, not moving an inch, not making any effort to go to the other field. I bet chickens would have ran right through that gate! Are we like those sheep when it comes to our faith? We need a shepherd to lead us or we'll end up standing around in one place rather than making progress in our walk of faith.

In our passage from John's gospel today, Jesus reminds us that he is the shepherd, and we are the sheep. It's a reminder we constantly need to hear, not necessarily to emphasize the point that we are sheep, but instead to emphasize the point that we are NOT the shepherd. We are sheep, so we are NOT the smartest person in the room, no matter what room we're in, because God is in that room, too. We may feel like we've got everything together, like we have this faith thing all figured out, that our wool is the shiniest or our "Baa!" is the prettiest, but we are still sheep. We need a shepherd to follow.

That idea doesn't sit too well in our world today. Being a follower isn't a sought-after, glamorous position. You know the saying about a dog sled team: If you're not the lead dog, the view never changes. In our world there is an overwhelming focus on the art of leadership and an underwhelming focus on the practice of followership. How many times have you been offered the opportunity to participate in a seminar on how to be a good follower? How many books have you read lately on how to follow an effective leader? Nobody dreams big dreams about being a follower. Nobody aspires to be the assistant regional manager, let alone the assistant to the regional manager. Nobody wants to grow up to be a sheep.

I get it. It doesn't sound like a lot of fun to simply be part of the flock, does it? Who wants to be just go along with the crowd? Just about every TV commercial we see tells us that if we want to be unique, we should join the millions of other people who use this product. In a world of billions of people, someone has tried to sell us on the supremacy of individuality, and we've bought it. But that illusion gets shattered when, whether you drive a Ferrari or a Ford, you still have to stay in your house and wear a mask. We're not as individualistic as we think we are. Scripture is clear: we are called, not to be the shepherd, but to follow the Good Shepherd, to be part of the flock.

There's another reason Jesus advises us about the importance of entrusting ourselves to the Good Shepherd. Jesus warns about the dangers of the wolf, who "snatches and scatters" the sheep. That takes on a new meaning for us in our world today, which enables us to be scattered in a couple of different ways. We are scattered internally as our attention is pulled in a thousand different directions and we lose our ability to focus and prioritize. And we're scattered externally, not bound together by a sense of community or commonality, but divided along political and cultural lines. The wolf has done effective work in our midst, because we are scattered. We need a shepherd.

So what does it mean to be sheep, to faithfully follow our Good Shepherd instead of standing around in one place or wandering off on our own? First, we need to be aware of the Shepherd's presence. Our passage talks about how the sheep will know the voice of the shepherd. That's curious, because when we talk about being aware of God's presence, we tend to use sight rather than sound as a metaphor for knowing God. We talk about seeing God around us, looking for God's presence, watching for signs of God's work. But what if God is more auditory than visual? What if God is better heard than seen? Would we know the sound of God's voice?

One of the founders of our denomination, Alexander Campbell, talked about the need for a Christian to come within "understanding distance" of the Bible in order to build and maintain a relationship with God. I think we need to come within "recognizing distance" of God's voice in order to know when God is speaking to us. The Good Shepherd is constantly speaking to us - through scripture, through worship, through trusted voices around us. Would we recognize his voice if we heard it? Are we even listening?

There's a big difference between hearing and listening. Because our ears don't have mudflaps or earlids, we can't control all the sound that goes in them. We hear all kinds of stuff every day, whether we want to or not. But we listen for the things we want to hear. Listening implies intent, like paying attention to the words of a song or a baby's cry. The sheep listen for the sound of the shepherd's voice. Are you hoping to hear God's voice, or are you listening for it?

Along with hearing the shepherd's voice, we also have to respond to the shepherd's leading. It's interesting to note an important difference between cows and sheep. If you want a cow to go somewhere, you lead it from the front. But if you want to guide sheep, you herd them. Sheep are meant to be herded from behind. Our dog, Sadie, is part Australian shepherd, and she is constantly trying to herd our other dog, Jack, who then looks at me like, "Did you really have to get a second dog? Was I not good enough?" Sheep are led from behind.

That's fascinating to consider when you think about God as our shepherd. So often we look for God out ahead of us, showing us the way, sending flashing neon arrows to guide us. And when we don't see that, we're disappointed. "Where is God?" Maybe, instead of in front of us, God is behind us, nudging us, encouraging us. Maybe God's method of leading us isn't to show us the right decision to make, but rather to encourage us to use the gifts we have - our conscience, our hearts, our brains - to make the decision we feel is best, and then to walk alongside us into that decision. We expect God to lead us like cows - "God, show me what to do" - when the Good Shepherd is saying, "Do what you think is best - that's why I gave you free will in the first place." Often times, people will pray, "God, show me the perfect job" or "Bring me the perfect partner." Maybe God's role isn't to make the decision for us, but to empower us to decide for ourselves. I believe God isn't concerned whether we make this decision or that decision. I believe God wants us to be faithful to and glorify God, no matter what choice we make. Because God will be with us regardless.

So, we have to be aware of the Shepherd's voice and respond to the Shepherd's leading from behind. Finally, I hear Jesus in the passage saying that, if we want to be good sheep, we have to be part of the flock. We have to be with other sheep. No matter how smelly they might be, no matter how much noise they sometimes make, no matter if they have a little wool or a lot of wool or no wool at all, community is essential to our survival. If a sheep became isolated, it was vulnerable to attack because it wasn't protected by the flock. There's no such thing as a solitary sheep, and there's no such thing as an individual Christian. We are not religious individuals who happen to be members of a particular community; we are a community first, knit together by our faith and God's grace.

That community doesn't stop existing when we cannot be together in person on Sunday morning. In fact, I think our community has been strengthened in many ways during this time of separation. We can't gather together, but we can still worship together, still pray together, still study the Bible together through the gift of technology. I teach a Sunday School class that usually has about 8-10 people on a Sunday. Since we've started meeting virtually, we've average about 24 people. Now more than ever, we are called to be part of the flock that follows Christ.

We are the sheep, called to be part of the flock and follow the master's voice. The Lord is our good shepherd, someone who cares enough to protect us when we are in need and loving enough to find us when we are lost. Thank you, God, for that! Even when we feel isolated or lonely or fearful, we are not alone. We have God and we have each other. May we strive every day to be God's people, the sheep of God's pasture.