

“Of Sheep and Shepherds”

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John 10: 11-18

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One of the more controversial statements I've made in my public ministry is to admit that I am not terribly fond of sheep. I first encountered this problem ten years ago on this Sunday in Easter season, known as Good Shepherd Sunday. In what I thought was a fairly innocuous statement, I mentioned that I didn't really care for them.

This actually resulted in cards, emails, and a desire to photograph me several years later on the island of Iona trying to make my peace with these godly creatures. Had I realized the genuine affection many people have for these wool producing animals, I might have proceeded more carefully, but the reality is I've had a pretty limited experience with them.

My main interaction with sheep has been primarily in petting zoos I've frequented through the years. These interactions do not inspire much in the way of excitement. When you have small children the main thing the sheep have to offer is they will stand still. This makes them good candidates for brushing by the children. This makes them rank only slightly higher than the average prancing and biting goat.

But, in my experience, children usually are done with them in about two minutes. They become bored by them. The sheep did not have many distinguishing characteristics and there were certainly no favorites that emerged through the years. Their wool always seems dingy and sprinkled with debris. One seems pretty much like the other. The idea of someone even taking the time to name one, seems a stretch. At Zoo Atlanta during the train ride we always waved to Pickles the Pig. We were never invited to wave to the sheep.

However, since my insensitive comments about sheep I have come to learn through the grace of community that they have more to offer than I initially thought. They are far more intelligent creatures than their prominence in petting zoos might suggest. They actually can discern between different voices, which is more than we can say some weeks when we are caught in an endless news cycle.

Indeed sheep do respond to the voice of their shepherd and will not follow a stranger. To have the discernment to follow wisely is much more at the heart of this passage than the characteristic of those relegated to the flock.

Maybe we are invited to set aside our resistance to being gathered together in the close living quarters of the sheep fold. While we don't like being crowded by other sheep, or

being held up by that one that is always going astray, or at least running late, if we are to follow God, this is fairly inevitable. We have to give up our desire for a nice private pasture, with our own special path, plenty of leg room and complimentary beverages.

One of my favorite lines from the rule of life I follow is that we seek and find the presence of God in “the rub of community life.”

It is a very understated way of reminding us that in our efforts to simply make our way through life, we are likely to encounter the rub. Sometimes it is full on conflict. But sometimes the more insidious form of separation that can happen in life together is the impatience that comes when we are tired, impatient, bored, overwhelmed, feeling taken advantage of, and under appreciated.

In those subtle “rubs” of community life if we are not intentionally seeking the presence of God, we may awaken to find we have drifted far away from the voice of the Shepherd. We suddenly find ourselves in dangerous territory.

This is when we are likely to hear other voices taking hold—the voices of the thieves and bandits. You know the ones. They subtly tell us that we really are better than most of the herd—we can be better off without it. Instead of seeking the good shepherd, the one who asks us to model our life through humility and offering of ourselves, we start looking for those who would rob us of abundant life.

The thieves and bandits do not only work with our pride. They will access us any way but the straightforward call of the Shepherd. Sometimes they tell us we are even worse than the herd---that we are separated by our own mistakes or inadequacies. We are outside the range of the flock and the Shepherd won't be bothered to go and look for us. The minute we place those shortcomings outside the gaze of the Shepherd's love we start to live compartmentalized lives. Ones that require us to hide, rather than allowing forgiveness and reconciliation to be part of our practice. Instead of being fully present and vulnerable, we fear we need to get our act together before we would dream of rejoining the herd or showing up on a Sunday morning.

Whether through pride or shame, the distance has been established and we are vulnerable to the voices of the thieves and bandits. It is then we need to intentionally seek out the community that models life with the Good Shepherd. When we hear the term “good” shepherd we need to be reminded that it is not just good in the sense of the opposite of bad. No, the good shepherd extends itself to a much fuller offering. It is meant to be a shepherd that we can model ourselves on. Certainly we come to know this in the ministry and life of Jesus. But we also know it in those who transcend themselves in their earthly walk.

Like many of you, I was saddened to hear of the passing of the former First Lady Barbara Bush this past year. As I immersed myself in this image of the Good Shepherd this week, she kept coming to mind. What I realized was that ultimately what was so impressive about her was her authenticity. You knew what you were getting with her. She was grounded and unafraid to be who God had called her to be. She was fiercely loving and protective of her primary flock, her family. But that led her to model life well beyond those primary relationships. Losing a child made her more compassionate to others and willing to take risks by holding a baby infected with HIV when fear made many stay away. A lifelong love of books made her want to share literacy with those most vulnerable in our society. She wasn't afraid to be firm and call those she loved to higher purpose. One of her son's said, "She might have been America's grandmother, but we knew her as the enforcer."

True models are those who can be fully themselves, while offering us a way to become more fully who we have been called to be. The sheep at first may seem a bit too uniform for our tastes, but when we follow the shepherd, we find our particularity much more present. Each of us have to discern the voice of our Shepherd, and model ourselves in response to that voice. What connects us to the herd is love.

The more we can see ourselves as linked through that love, the less we will need to worry about protecting our individuality, it will flourish in the midst of the herd. We will start to enact the kind of communities that take the needs of all as a common concern. We will still be our own unique selves, but it will be the selfhood of humility. We will not take ourselves too seriously or too lightly. Then we will hear the voice we are called to follow.

Amen