

Smart Sheep
May 11, 2014

John 10:1-18

Two men were called on, in a large classroom, to recite the Twenty-third Psalm. One was an orator trained in speech technique and drama. He repeated the psalm in a powerful way.

When he finished, the audience cheered and asked for an encore that they might hear his wonderful voice again.

Then the other man repeated the same words--'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...' but when he finished, no sound came from the class. Instead, people sat in a mood of deep devotion and prayer.

Then the first man stood to his feet. "I have a confession to make," he said. "The difference between what you have just heard from my friend and what you heard from me is this: I know the Psalm, but my friend knows the Shepherd."

There are many images in the Gospel of John, but certainly one of the most meaningful ones is that of Jesus as a shepherd. Like a shepherd, Jesus is concerned with the welfare and the care of His sheep. The shepherd loves his sheep.

Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He didn't call himself King Jesus...He didn't call himself President Jesus...He didn't call himself Commissioner Jesus...He didn't call himself Mayor Jesus...Doctor Jesus...Reverend Jesus...Elder Jesus...Or Deacon Jesus....

He never claimed equality with God.

But he called himself a shepherd...A servant... A caretaker...A watchmen...A provider...He called himself a shepherd... And I think that is really significant.

We are his people and the sheep of his pasture. And just as a shepherd watches over his sheep...So does God watch over his children.

Two caretakers are mentioned in our gospel reading for today, the Good Shepherd, and the hired hand.

The hired hand had no connection with the sheep, no relationship with the sheep. He thought of himself first and the sheep last. If a sheep was attacked by a wolf, or lost, oh well, tough luck.

Then there is the good shepherd. The good shepherd is the owner of the sheep. He has a special relationship with them.

Most owners in those days didn't own a lot of sheep. A flock of 100 was huge. Most flocks were no larger than 10-20. Sheep were like valued pets. There was nothing about their sheep that the good shepherd did not know.

The individual sheep in a flock all look alike to the untrained eye. A good shepherd, however, can tell them apart--often because of their markings or peculiar traits.

A shepherd was explaining this to a friend who was surprised by his familiarity with each animal.

"See that sheep over there?" he asked. "Notice how its feet toe in a little. The one behind it walks kind of sideways; the next one has a patch of wool off its back; there's one with a black mark below its eye, while the one closest to us has a small piece torn out of its ear.

He knew each by name. These were not just sheep; they were Patch, Limpy, Blackie, Tag, Nosey, and so on. By day and night the shepherd lived with them. He was always there for them.

You see, a shepherd, in order to know his sheep and care for them, has to live among them. Our Good Shepherd was a sheep, a human being that lived life just like us.

That's why He is the good Shepherd. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, knows the peculiar traits of His flock and watches over us with love and concern.

A cemetery has a tombstone that bears the following epitaph: "Pause Stranger, when you pass me by, As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be, So prepare for death and follow me."

An unknown passerby scratched the following reply underneath: "To follow you I'm not content, Until I know which way you went!"

The 23rd Psalm that we're all familiar with says, "The Lord is my shepherd." Shepherds go before their flock; they lead their flock, never asking them to do anything that they wouldn't do first. "...and the sheep follow him because they know his voice" as our gospel reading says.

Even though flocks may mingle together, each flock knew its own shepherd's voice, and each would follow its own shepherd and no other.

My dad was the youngest of 13 children, so you can imagine that I had quite a few first cousins. I was a city boy myself, but many of those cousins grew up on farms, and most of those farms had cows.

I remember one of my cousins talking about how when he got old enough it fell to him to do the evening milking.

Their cows had a little pasture down the lane a good bit away from the barn, so to save time my uncle had a special call he would use. He'd call and soon the cows would appear in the lane out of the pasture headed up for their milking.

He taught my cousin the call but it took awhile before the cows would respond to his call. So, till they did, he'd have to walk all the way down to get them moving.

Sometimes it takes us a little while before we respond to God's call, as well.

A man in Australia was arrested and charged with stealing a sheep. But he vigorously protested that it was one of his own that had been missing for many days. When the case went to court, the judge didn't know how to decide the matter.

Finally he asked that the sheep be brought into the courtroom. Then he ordered the plaintiff to step outside and call the animal. The sheep made no response except to raise its head and look frightened.

The judge then instructed the defendant to go to the courtyard and call the sheep. When the accused man began to make his distinctive call, the sheep ran toward the door and that voice.

It was obvious that he recognized the familiar voice of his master. "His sheep knows him," said the judge. "Case dismissed!")

Jesus said, "My sheep know my voice. . ."

Announcer Dave Johnson has called the Triple Crown races for ABC-TV for many years. When away from the horse races Johnson does a great deal of commercial and voice-over work.

He tried out for a spot in a commercial where they wanted someone to say, "They're off!" The casting director told him, 'I want you to sound like the guy who calls the Kentucky Derby.'

"No problem,' Johnson said. 'I am the guy who calls the Kentucky Derby.' He said he figured he was a cinch to get the part. The funny thing is—he didn't! He said, "Apparently there was someone who sounded more like me than I did."

There are a lot of voices out there competing for our time and attention. Are we tuned in to the voice of our good shepherd?

In today's gospel reading, Jesus describes a sheep pen. It had only one door. When the sheep returned to the fold at night after a day of grazing in the pleasant pastures, the shepherd stood in the doorway and inspected each one with tender care as it entered.

If a sheep was scratched or wounded by thorns, the shepherd would anoint it with oil to facilitate healing. If they were thirsty, he gave them water.

After all had been counted and brought into the pen, the shepherd would lay across the doorway so no intruder could enter. The shepherd thus became the door.

That's a very appropriate image. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who protects and sustains the life of the sheep.

Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep." I think that is a beautiful analogy of the love, care and concern that Jesus has for us.

Jesus goes on to say that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. When Jesus laid down His life for the sheep He saved us from the destroying wolves of sin and death.

He gave His life to kill them and take away their power so they couldn't destroy the flock.

But if the story ended there we'd have a problem. If a flock of sheep loses their shepherd because he laid down his life to save them from a pack of wolves, they are now shepherd-less.

And even if no more wolves come, soon they'll wander off and get lost. And the death of the shepherd will have been in vain.

But the story doesn't end here with the shepherd dead and the sheep scattered. Verse 18 tells us why: Jesus said, "No man takes my life from Me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down, and I have the power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.

Under the Old Testament law, the sheep died for the shepherd, but now the Good Shepherd dies for the sheep!

In the book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Eric Butterworth tells the story of a college professor who had his sociology class go into the Baltimore slums to get case histories of 200 young boys.

The students were asked to write an evaluation of each boy's future. In every case the students wrote, "He doesn't have a chance."

Twenty-five years later another sociology professor came across this earlier study. He had his students do follow up on the same 200 boys who were now men.

With the exception of 20 boys who had moved away or died, the students learned that 176 of the remaining 180 had achieved more than ordinary success as lawyers, doctors, and businessmen.

The professor was astounded and decided to pursue the matter further. Fortunately, all the men were in the area and he was able to ask each one, "How do you account for your success?" In each case the reply came with feeling, "There was a teacher."

The teacher was still alive, so he sought her out and asked the old but still alert lady what magic formula she had used to pull these boys out of the slums into successful achievement.

The teacher's eyes sparkled and her lips broke into a gentle smile. "It's really very simple," she said. "I loved those boys."

Their success was based on the love of a teacher.

Our success as followers of Jesus is based on the love of a shepherd who was willing to lay down his life for us.

He loved us enough that our sinfulness became his burden.

He loved us enough that his righteousness became ours.

He loved us enough to suffer death for us.

To save us from eternal death. To prepare us to meet God. He will keep us safe in the sheepfold if we're smart sheep and follow the Good Shepherd.

I want to go back for just a moment to what is perhaps my favorite verse in all of scripture. Or maybe "favorite" is not a good word – rather I should say that it has become perhaps the most meaningful verse of scripture for me. That is John 10:10, more specifically the second part of that verse.

In the New Living Translation that I read from, Jesus says, "my purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life." Another translation I like says, "I have come that you might have life in all its fullness."

As important as our eternal salvation is, and make no mistake about it – it is of the utmost importance – I think that sometimes our emphasis on the "pie in the sky by and by" causes us or at least many Christians to overlook the importance and significance of John 10:10.

A rich and satisfying life; life in all its fullness. I believe that Jesus was talking about our life in the here and now.

Not only did Jesus, through his atoning sacrifice, make it possible for us to be reconciled to God and live eternally with him, he also came to show us the way to have the richest, fullest, most satisfying life here on earth.

Many folks are so concerned with life after death that they completely overlook the importance of life after birth. But that is what the earthly life and ministry of Jesus was all about.

If we believe in and accept what Christ has done for us through his death and resurrection, then our eternity with God is assured. It is promised it is secure.

We don't have to worry about that, and if we believe what we say we believe about God's grace there's nothing we can do to earn it anyway. It is a gift.

But there is plenty that we can do about how we live our life now, before that time comes. And that is a key part of following Christ as well.

Live as he taught and as he lived. He tells us that in this way we will have the richest and most satisfying life.

And I believe that smart sheep will take him at his word and do just that!