

THE FLOCK AND ITS SHEPHERD

a sermon based on 1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

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It is small wonder that the image of a shepherd was frequently included in Jesus' teachings. It was a major part of his heritage and culture. Abraham, the father of the nation, was the keeper of great flocks. Moses was tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, when God called him into a special service. David was a shepherd boy called in from the fields and was anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the next King of Israel after Saul.

The imagery of the shepherd was also imprinted upon the literature of the day. The 23rd Psalm is frequently referred to as the shepherd psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters."

When Isaiah spoke of the coming of the Messiah he worded it by saying: "He will feed his flock like a shepherd! He will gather his lambs into his arms." So, the tradition of the shepherd was very much a part of Jesus' heritage.

The image of Jesus as a shepherd comes clearly into focus throughout the New Testament. Jesus told a story about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but one of them went astray. In our way of thinking, saving 99% is a pretty good survival rate, but not for this shepherd. He left the 99 safely in the fold while he went in search of that one lost sheep. Later, when Jesus was speaking to a great throng of people, Mark tells us that he had compassion upon them because they were "as sheep without a shepherd."

Throughout the Judeo-Christian faith, then, the image of the shepherd has been stamped upon our thinking. In our scripture text for this morning Jesus again taps into this imagery when he refers to himself as the good shepherd. For a few moments this morning, I would like for us to think about the flock and its shepherd. First of all, Jesus reminds us that a shepherd's job is a serious responsibility, not to be taken lightly, since the life and well-being of the sheep are at stake. I have a

story.

A pastor was taking a group of parishioners on a tour of the Holy Land. He had just read them the parable of the good shepherd and was explaining to them that, as they continued their tour, they would see shepherds on the hillsides just as in Jesus' day. He wanted to impress the group, so he told them what every good pastor tells his people about shepherds. He described how, in the Holy Land, shepherds always lead their sheep, always walking in front to face dangers, always protecting the sheep by going ahead of them. He barely got the last word out when, sure enough, they rounded a corner and saw a man and his sheep on the hillside. There was only one problem: the man wasn't leading the sheep as the good pastor had said. No, he was behind the sheep and seemed to be chasing them. The pastor turned red. Flabbergasted, he ran over to the fence and said, "I always thought shepherds in this region led their sheep -- out in front. I told my people that a good shepherd never chases his sheep." The man replied, "That's absolutely true... you're are correct. But I'm not the shepherd. I'm the butcher!"

I am afraid that in this day and age we are all too familiar with the butcher, the person who wants to con us or manipulate us for his own ends, or to use another metaphor, the one who will take us to the cleaners if we're not careful. Every day we receive several telemarketer phone calls offering us the lowest mortgage rates if we refinance with them. Or they offer the best insurance rates, the best phone rates, or the best whatever.

One of the worst scams out there are groups who identify themselves as something like the "Friends of the Police" or the "Fire Fighters' League" and they claim to be soliciting donations to help our police or fire fighters who have been wounded in action or the families of those killed in action. I once asked a friend who was chief of police where we lived about these solicitations and he said we should never contribute to them because neither the police nor the fire fighters are permitted to solicit funds in that way. Regarding charity solicitations in general, not long ago I heard on National Public Radio that one so-called charity telemarketer routinely keeps up to 95 per cent of the contributions it collects, leaving only 5 per cent for the people they claim to be helping. One company recently collected 30 million dollars, only \$40,000 of which actually went to the charity it was supposedly collecting for.

Likewise, there are many so-called home improvement contractors out there preying

upon unsuspecting elderly people. They will promise to fix leaky roofs or replace old wiring or old plumbing or any number of jobs that need doing around the house but will demand a large amount of cash up front for the ostensible purpose of purchasing materials. Then, they either do a shoddy job or never come back at all. Sometimes they will claim to be Christian. In such a situation, you may say, "I have to call my friend first. He'll tell me what I should do." Then you get the name and phone number of the business and call the church and either Morgan or I will give you the will give you the name and number of one our "friends" who will check the man and his company out. If the person won't give you his name and number, then you know he is not to be trusted.

These are not the good shepherd but the butcher who will take advantage of you if he can. His only purpose is to make money but not truly watch over the sheep. Of course, these bad shepherds make it difficult for the good shepherds to do their job but there are ways of checking a person's credentials to make certain he is what he claims to be.

Now, let's think about Jesus' claim that the Good Shepherd knows his sheep. I once saw a television special about middle-east shepherds - people who live a life that isn't radically different from that of their first century counter-parts. It was fascinating to see the lives they led, wandering endlessly in search of fields where their sheep might graze. Every night, the sheep were led into a protected area - a "sheepfold." Sometimes, there would be three or four or five flocks gathered by a number of shepherds into the same area. The shepherds would take shifts staying up throughout the night, making sure that wolves or other wild animals weren't able to make their way into the protected area. In the morning, a person would wonder if there was any hope of separating one flock from another. But I was surprised to learn that it was a very simple matter. Each shepherd went to opposite corners of the field, and began to call the sheep. As the sheep heard the shepherds' voices, they immediately began to move towards the one that belonged to their shepherd. After a few minutes, all the sheep were separated into their own flocks, and the shepherds lead them away. Sheep know the voice of their own shepherd, and they follow it.

Jesus connected with people in this way. That's why we call the people who traveled with him and who listened to his teachings his followers. They knew his voice and trusted him to lead them beside still waters, in paths of righteousness.

Carl Rogers, a well-known and beloved psychologist and therapist of the last century, was convinced that all human beings strive for health and wholeness. This conviction arose out of his Christian faith that, no matter how bad a person may be, there is an impulse within that person that seeks the good. He believed that Jesus drew out the good in people and helped them to fulfill their positive potential. Like Carl Rogers, this has been the guiding principle in my work with people. This August I will be marking the 35th anniversary of my ordination. I can remember as if it were yesterday how I prayed that God would help me to know whether I was truly called to the ordained ministry. I confessed that I did not feel worthy to be a minister. I told him that I just wasn't a good enough person to be a minister. And shortly after that, my mentor The Rev. Dr. Dale Turner asked me if I had given any more thought to the ordained ministry. I told him that I had but that I didn't feel good enough to be a minister. He smiled and said, "Lad, if only good people went into the ministry, we'd have empty pulpits across the land. God doesn't call only good people to ministry. He calls people like Peter, who had goodness in him but didn't always live up to that goodness, such as the time he denied even knowing his master, Jesus in his darkest hour. God calls people like Paul, who persecuted the Christians but went on to become the most powerful evangelist of the early church. God calls people like St. Francis of Assisi who was a profligate and a womanizer but who found that lifestyle to be empty and unsatisfying. So, he devoted his life to serving others in the name of Jesus Christ and thousands of people have since devoted themselves to Christian service as members of the Franciscan orders that were founded in his memory many centuries ago. God doesn't call us because we are good but because we have goodness in us and, as we follow Jesus, he will help that goodness to guide us in the right path."

Jesus said, "My sheep know me and they will listen to my voice." I realized then that I was listening to Jesus' voice. God was calling me, sinner that I was and still am today, not because I was good but because I had goodness in me.

Finally, let us consider the curious statement that Jesus made, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Here, Jesus was referring to the Gentiles, those who did not come from the Jewish community, and yet had come to listen to Jesus' teachings because they addressed a deep need they had for being acknowledged and accepted as human beings. I have a story. Father Andrew Greely, noted Chicago Tribune columnist and novelist, wrote this fable.

Once upon a time there was a Mom, who tried her best to be a good Mom and to be fair with all her children. Her children, like all children, didn't really appreciate this and were always telling her she did more for one or the other of them than she did for all of them. "You love her (him) more than you do me", was an oft heard refrain from one or the other. Though the Mom felt bad about her children's reaction, she just continued to do the best she could to keep them all satisfied. She encouraged their individual talents, seeing them as God-given gifts that needed her encouragement. When they reached adulthood and were out on their own, each one doing his or her own thing, she often wondered if she could have done something else to discourage sibling rivalry. Imagine her surprise one Mother's Day, when she was well up in years, when each child told a story about a time when she made them feel so loved that they were able to take the necessary steps to succeed in some project. They said that these memories had been a powerful force in their everyday lives and in how they try to parent their own children. They ended their storytelling by singing a song entitled, "A Mother's Love is a Blessing!"

Jesus tells us that God loves everyone. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, includes all people in the fold. Jesus, the Good Shepherd sees the goodness in all of us and he empowers us, through God's unconditional love to find the goodness within ourselves and utilize it in service to others. Then, as we help others to recognize the goodness within them, we become the Good Shepherd for others in the name of Jesus Christ.

And let the people say, "Amen."