

Sheep and Shepherd
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 First Presbyterian Church, New Bern
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John 10:11-18

11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away — and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I 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. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

I mentioned to another member of First Presbyterian that in honor of Taylor Swifts’ release of an album on Friday morning at midnight and a surprise part II album release at 2:00am, that I would, as a parallel surprise, be preaching two sermons today. Her response came back: “As long as you can be as entertaining as Taylor Swift, I don’t think anyone will have a problem with that.”

So. One sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday it is.

It is, as the readings might have already suggested, Good Shepherd Sunday, when we hear and focus on readings and images that are throughout the Bible that present God as the shepherd and us as the flock, the sheep. In researching the modern understandings of this passages, Jesus’ teachings about the Good Shepherd, it became apparent to me that there are many, many, people who struggle with this metaphor. Who do not find being invited to be a sheep to Jesus’ shepherd a good thing.

Sometimes it that it is just a basic level of discomfort. Jan Richardson writes:¹

I have to admit that of all the ways of describing Jesus, the image of him as a shepherd is one I’ve never particularly gravitated toward. I suspect this owes to a combination of factors: I live in a culture that is far removed from the agrarian setting in which Jesus employed this image, and I grew up around cows, so am not very knowledgeable in the ways of sheepdom. I suspect, however, that the real reason that I struggle with shepherd imagery is this: I am resistant to being herded. I am also all too aware of how badly things can go wrong when we are overly willing to let ourselves be led. (“Lambs to the slaughter” comes too easily to mind.)

¹ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2008/04/11/easter-4-in-which-we-do-some-sheep-wrestling/>

I found others who think that this passage isn't really about us as sheep, and that the focus should entirely be on the Shepherd. Not about how we follow, but about how God leads.²

Still others think that we should feel honored to be sheep because we are seen as a valuable commodity.³

And there are those who simply reject this metaphor as outdated, because they don't want to be, won't be, seen as sheep.

The thread that runs through all of these approaches is a basic understanding that sheep are, well, dumb. "Dumber-than-dumb. Not just stupid but mind-numbingly stupid— sometimes I wonder how they manage to breathe and eat, one ag blogger wrote."⁴ There is at least one reddit thread devoted to dumb things sheep do.

A podcast I regularly listen to, Pulpit Fiction, that explores the lectionary texts for each Sunday, takes a different approach. They consulted a variety of science and zoological research and journals. And here's what they found:⁵

Sheep are communal and social animals. They don't like being on their own.

They recognize not only voices, but faces.⁶

They establish long term and firm friendships.

And they form other attachments, too. Romantic attachments.

It appears that 8% of male sheep exhibit a life-long romantic preference for other male sheep.

Stronger sheep intervene for weaker sheep.

Sheep feel emotions. from fear to anger, despair, boredom and happiness.

They like following, not being driven. And there is a difference.

They like routines. Change is hard.

They react negatively to loud noises and yelling.

They don't like being yelled at.

Maybe we don't need to shy away from this metaphor. Maybe, we don't need to shy away from being called sheep. Because what we can trust. What the Psalmist and Jesus would have known, is

² <https://www.challies.com/christian-living/dumb-as-sheep/>

<https://odb.org/2018/11/13/dumb-sheep-good-shepherd>

³ <https://www.christianparenting.org/articles/why-jesus-compares-us-to-sheep-its-kinda-funny/>

https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueAtheism/comments/jtbv4i/christianity_literally_degrades_its_own_followers/

⁴ https://agupdate.com/midwestmessenger/opinion/columnists/glenn_brunkow/the-questionable-intelligence-of-sheep/article_69540f07-7577-5559-bfde-a31ea95acc0c.html

⁵ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/easter4b/#John10%3A11-18=>

The sheep offers a unique mammalian model in which to study paradoxical same-sex sexual partner preferences.

Variations in sexual partner preferences occur spontaneously with as many as 8% of rams in a population exhibiting a sexual preference for other rams (male-oriented). The current

[https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3085551/#:~:text=The%20sheep%20offers%20a%20unique,rams%20\(male%2Doriented\).](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3085551/#:~:text=The%20sheep%20offers%20a%20unique,rams%20(male%2Doriented).)

⁶ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/sheep-are-able-to-recognise-human-faces-from-photographs>

that we have a lot in common. We with them and they with us. We aren't idiots. We are not dumb. We can trust. We can follow. We are made, wonderfully and fearfully.

And not just us, but the other sheep that are God's that we do not know. Gentiles? People of other faiths? Creations on other planets? Maybe one. Maybe all. At the very least, it is an invitation to see, as Jack Rogers put it, that the life of faith is more like a bird bath than a bird cage. In a bird cage the focus is on boundaries. Who is in and who is out. A bird bath has water that spills out, life-giving water, to be shared. That we want to go beyond our own patch of ground.⁷

We were created not to be on our own, but to be together. We cannot be in God's flock unless we are with others. Those who are the same. Those who are different. Those who affirm us. Those who challenge us. All of us, together.

For there is no singular sheep here, only sheep as a flock.

In her new book, her wonderful book titled The Amen Affect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Hearts and World, Rabbi Sharon Brous writes that the spiritual work of our time, as instinctual as it is countercultural, is to find our way to one another in celebration, in sorrow, and in solidarity.

In the book, she tells of a practice she learned about more than 20 years ago when she was in seminary.

These are her words:⁸

It was a Mishnah, a Rabbinic teaching buried deep in a third-century Jewish legal compendium...

The text speaks of an ancient pilgrimage ritual, when hundreds of thousands of people would ascend to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the focal point of Jewish religious and political life in the ancient world. The crowd would enter the Courtyard in a mass of humanity, turning to the right and circling-counterclockwise—around the enormous complex, exiting close to where they had entered. But someone suffering, the text tells us, the grieving, the lonely, the sick—someone to whom something awful had happened—that person would walk through the same entrance and circle in the opposite direction. Just as we do when we're hurting: every step, against the current. And every person who passed the brokenhearted would stop and ask, "What happened to you?" "I lost my mother," the bereaved would answer. "I miss her so much." Or perhaps, "My husband left." Or, "I found a lump." "Our son is sick." "I just feel so lost."

⁷ Jack Rogers. Claiming the Center: Churches and Conflicting Worldviews. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press] 1995, pages 170-171.

⁸ Brous, Sharon. The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Heal Our Hearts and Mend Our Broken World. (New York: Avery Press), 2024. Pages 1-6.

<https://ikar.org/team/rabbi-sharon-brous/>

And those who walked from right to left—each one of them—would look into the eyes of the ill, the bereft, and the bereaved. "May God comfort you," they would say, one by one. "May you be wrapped in the embrace of this community."

Two thousand years ago, the Rabbis constructed a system of ritual engagement built on a profound psychological in-sight: when you're suffering, when your loved one hovers between life and death, when you feel hemmed in by the darkness, when all you want is to self-isolate—because who would understand anyway?—you show up. You root your suffering in a context of care.... the whole world moves seamlessly in one direction and you in another. And even still, you trust that you won't be marginalized, mocked, misunderstood. In this place, you will be held, even at the ragged edge of life.

Now imagine: pilgrimage to Jerusalem has been a lifelong dream. You've planned, prepared, and saved for years. Maybe you've traveled from the northern or southern tip of the Land, perhaps from Babylonia or Egypt or some other corner of the diaspora. You arrive to a bustling Jerusalem, alive with feasting and celebration. You immerse yourself in the ritual bath and then make your way to the Temple Mount, the holiest site in the holiest city. You ascend a grand staircase and walk through the arched entrance to immense, elaborately decorated, high-ceilinged porticoes. You burst into tears, overcome by emotion to be surrounded by pilgrims from the farthest reaches, all gathered in common cause. You begin to process around the Courtyard, in rhythm with the masses. [It is liminal. It is transcendent.]

But look! There's a stranger coming toward you, making her way against the flow of the crowd. Her stride is slow. She seems impervious to the festive spirit of the day. She is clearly suffering. You want to avert your eyes like you're on some New York City subway platform, but you're not allowed to.

You stop and greet her with a simple, openhearted question:

"What's your story? Why does your heart ache?"

And this grief-stricken person answers: "I am broken."

You offer words of comfort. "I see you," you say. "You are not alone."

You continue to walk, until the next distressed person approaches.

There is a timeless wisdom in entering the sacred circle: this is, on some fundamental level, what it means to be human.

Today, you walk from left to right. Tomorrow, it will be me. I hold you now, knowing that eventually, you'll hold me. Every gesture of recognition marries love and humility, vulnerability and sacred responsibility....grieving and rejoicing together, and recognizing that even though we can't heal each other, we can and we must see each other.

This is what it means to be sheep. Why we are called to be a flock. With God as our shepherd. Trusting the ways of God even when we think it doesn't make sense. When we think we know a better way. To give. To forgive. To share. To be honest. To rest. To show up. And be transformed both in here and out there.

This is what we do, isn't it? And where else, is there anywhere else where this happens?

What we are doing here is no little thing. It's not a new thing. It's an ancient thing. It is a very big, very important thing.

Are we called to be sheep? We most certainly are. Together. In here. And out there. This flock. We shouldn't shy away from it, we are called to embrace it.

Not only does our world need communities of care, but we do, too. And if we let it, it can transform us.

And it starts by being honest. Being honest about where we are. And being honest in looking, hearing, seeing where others are, too.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father."

Good news indeed.