

April 22, 2018  
John 10:11-18  
Pastor Rosanna McFadden  
Creekside COB

### **“Not Just Any Shepherd”**

**Good morning! Back in the day, when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I had a conversation with a couple 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys while we were waiting for the bus. The conversation went like this: they asked “What does your Dad do?” I recognized immediately that this a trick question -- these boys wanted to make fun of me. This was easy to do, and ridicule is pretty much the common denominator of Junior High interactions. My father was a theologian: he taught New Testament and Brethren history at the local college, and wrote books about religion. I was already weird, I wasn't about to tell these guys all of that. So I said, “My Dad is a pastor.” They thought this was hilarious: “Her Dad's a pasture! He's just a piece of grass!” Did I mention that 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys can be jerks? Despite my embarrassment, and wishing I could kick their grass, those boys were not far off.**

**Some Sundays the lectionary texts from the psalms, prophets, gospels and New Testament writings seem to share hardly any connection at all. But today, the fourth Sunday of Easter is Good Shepherd Sunday. The psalm is Psalm 23, which begins, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want . . .” and we get this gospel text from John 10 which begins with Jesus telling his listeners, “I am the good shepherd.” This is not a coincidence.**

**The word pastor describes an ordained leader of a Christian congregation -- my dad did that, too -- but it comes from the Latin noun “pastor,” which means shepherd, which is based on the Latin verb which means to be fed or to graze. Pretty easy to trace how those words got to English: pastures are where pastors take their sheep to graze.**

Sheep were a staple of the economy in the Middle East; owning a large herd was a sign of prosperity. If you could afford to sacrifice a lamb for your burnt offering at the Temple, that was a sign of your economic and religious status. We hear a lot about sheep in the Bible -- in stories and in poetry. Psalm 114:4 says, "the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs," which is surely not meant literally, and Psalm 100:3 says, "Know that the Lord is God, It is he who made us and we are his. We are his people and the sheep of his pasture." I hope that part about us being sheep is a figure of speech, too.

But in biblical times, as now, wealth didn't always trickle down to the people at the bottom. Sheep *owners* may have been relatively wealthy, but they weren't the ones out in the fields tending and leading and sleeping with the sheep. You didn't have to be educated, ambitious, or even particularly bright to be a shepherd. It meant a lot of time alone outside in all kinds of weather. It was a job often assigned to sons who were not yet able or ready for adult work -- kids like David, the youngest son of Jesse. Having angels announce the birth of the Messiah to shepherds watching their flocks in the hills around Bethlehem, was a gutsy move for God, because shepherds were not exactly the most reputable and respected folks to share that good news.

But Jesus is not just any shepherd. Jesus says in John 10:11, I am the good shepherd. He repeats that sentence exactly in verse 14; this is a definitive statement which I think is important to unpack just a bit. It starts with the statement I am. This is the same construction which God uses with Moses at the burning bush. It is definitive and forceful I am; and Jesus completes the sentence by saying I am the good shepherd. Not *any* good shepherd, but *the* good shepherd. The English doesn't convey this as well as the Greek of the New Testament, but that word good is more than Jesus saying "I'm above average at watching sheep," it is an assertion that Jesus is the model of what a shepherd ought to be. Jesus is not just any shepherd, Jesus is whom we should look to when we want the perfect example of how God's people are to be cared for and protected, and who we are supposed to follow. It's pretty clear that if Jesus is the model of the Shepherd, that we are the sheep that he is watching over.

I have not ever raised sheep. Have any of you? We did see sheep all over the place when we were in Ireland last month. It's almost irresistible to walk up to them and make sheep noises. Contrary to any nursery rhymes you've heard, sheep do not say "Baa." It sounds more like "Behhh," (go ahead, try it) and it doesn't convey an impression of great intelligence. I've grown up with an image of sheep as kind of dumb, and I haven't really appreciated being assigned the role of one of the flock in these biblical examples. But my reading turned up some delightful information from Barbara Brown Taylor, in her sermon "The Voice of the Shepherd," to which I will refer at length. She says that it is cattle ranchers who spread the nasty rumor that sheep are dumb, because these ranchers saw that sheep do not behave like cows. Cows are herded from the rear: you drive them forward standing behind them and hooting and cracking whips. If you stand behind sheep and yell at them, they will run behind you, because sheep don't like to be driven, they want to be led. You push cows, but you lead sheep. Sheep want someone they trust -- their shepherd -- to go ahead of them and show them that everything is all right.

Sheep won't follow just anybody, though. Sheep actually develop a relationship with their shepherds: Barbara Brown Taylor's friend said that a shepherd that the sheep are familiar with can walk through a flock of sleeping sheep without disturbing a single one of them, but as soon as a stranger sets foot in the sheep fold, there is an uproar. The shepherd knows the sheep, too, and can tell when Behh means I'm happy, or when it means I'm upset, or Where's my lamb?

The sheep we saw in Ireland were marked with spray paint on the back of their heads: blue, pink, sometimes blue and pink, green. This is because sheep of different flocks can get mixed up together. This happened in biblical Palestine, and still happens today when several flocks are driven to the same watering hole. The flocks get mixed together -- six or eight small flocks which turn into a convention of thirsty sheep. Instead of marking the sheep with spray paint, when it's time to leave, each shepherd gives a distinctive call--not necessary with his voice, but a whistle or trill, or a tune on a pipe -- and heads off in the direction he wants to go; each flock knows their own shepherd and they sort themselves out and follow after him. This may not be rocket science on the part of the sheep, but it works

because of the relationship of experience and trust which has been built between the sheep and the shepherd. This information has made me feel better about being compared to a sheep, and has even made me wonder if sheep get the relationship and trust thing better than a lot of human beings.

If you agree with what I've said up to this point (and it's all true, to the best of my knowledge) than the last part of our text, beginning in verse 16, should shake you up a bit. Jesus says, "I have other sheep which 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." Wait a minute, I thought Jesus was our shepherd. The shepherd who leads and loves us, the one we know and follow. Jesus is not just any shepherd, Jesus is *our* shepherd -- What's this about *other* sheep? How are they going to know Jesus' voice?

Remember Psalm 100 which said "we are his people, the sheep of his pasture"? Jesus is affirming that Old Testament statement about God to say the he, Jesus, is not just any shepherd, but the Good Shepherd; we belong to Jesus. This does not mean, however, that Jesus belongs to us. The sheep do not get to tell the shepherd who belongs in *our* flock. There are other sheep that do not belong to this fold who need to be led and cared for too. Some have already heard the voice of the Good Shepherd; some are still out there wandering around with no one leading them, some are following other shepherds who are not good shepherds, and some are by themselves at the mercy of the wolves. John 10:16 says, "I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

And here, sisters and brothers, is where the sheep analogy falters a bit. Jesus is not just any shepherd, Jesus is the one perfect shepherd, so it makes sense that everyone should have the opportunity to be part of Jesus' flock. Sheep don't generally invite other sheep to join them, but that's something we can do. Maybe those other sheep that will listen to Jesus' voice aren't the same breed of sheep as we are -- maybe our little flock will get some new sheep with curly horns, or spotted wool, or gray sheep or black sheep. We are need to follow the same shepherd. We have all strayed away and need to hear Jesus' voice calling us to come home.

**We are all part of one great flock because that Shepherd gave his life for all of us. Praise God! And all God's people said, "Behhh." Amen.**