

TEXT: John 10:1-18

May 7, 2006

OTHER SHEEP

When was the last time you thought seriously about shepherds and sheep? OK, so you thought the kids in old bathrobes at Christmastime were cute. And the little ones with cotton ball masks made adorable sheep in the pageant. But when was the last time you really thought seriously about shepherds and sheep?

Unlike folks in the ancient world who saw shepherds at work all the time, where their very well-being depended on sheep, we just don't have much occasion to ponder the realities of shepherdess and sheep. Driving on 95 to work, you may see Canadian Geese on the side of the road, but not sheep. We're happy to have wool for sweaters and prayer shawls, and we enjoy a good lamb chop with mint once in awhile. But sheep, and even more so, shepherds, are very low on our list of discussion topics. "So, what do you think of the price of sheep?" isn't about to take the place of "Have you filled your gas tank lately?"

No so in the Bible. You find shepherds and sheep all over the place. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were all shepherds. Moses spent time watching over sheep. David's first job, long before he was a warrior and a king, was as a shepherd. The prophets talk often about sheep, frequently comparing Israel to a flock and God to a shepherd. And that all-time favorite, the twenty-third Psalm, is all about shepherds and sheep. In fact, there are over five hundred biblical references to sheep. It is one of the most frequently used words in all of scripture. That, in large measure, is due to the fact that sheep were central to life in ancient Israel.

When I was a child growing up in northern New England, people used to joke about the number of cows in our region. The state of New Hampshire was sometimes called Cow Hampshire. And up until the late seventies it was a well-known fact that there were more cows than people in the neighboring state of Vermont.

In New England it is considered very rude to discuss personal financial matters. You never ask someone how much money they make. And if you're talking to a dairy farmer, you don't ask how many cows he or she has—because the number of cows represents his or her financial worth. So it was in ancient Israel. If you wanted to describe how wealthy or poor a family was, you would say they had ten sheep or ten thousand sheep—or whatever. That's how important sheep were in that day and age.

It's no wonder then that more than once Jesus chooses to use shepherds and sheep to illustrate his stories. It was something his listeners would have fully understood.

And in our passage from John it provides the central metaphor for this bit of instruction.

Jesus compares his followers to sheep—and himself to a shepherd. “I am the good shepherd,” he says not once, but twice. He speaks at some length about how the good shepherd guides and protects his sheep. Even going so far as to lay down his very life for the sheep if that proves necessary.

The ancient plateau that occupies much of Israel is a rough, stone-strewn piece of territory. There was, in that day, little grass, and water was sparse. There were many cliffs and crags where a stray lamb could easily plunge to its death. And wolves, jackals, hyenas and even an occasional bear roamed the countryside. You could not leave flocks untended.

The shepherd would guide the sheep from one bit of grass to the next. The shepherd would make sure that they reached the oasis where they could find fresh springs of water. The shepherd would lead them around the dangerous spots on the safest of paths. And the shepherd would protect them against predators, both animal and human. A stone carefully placed in a sling-shot and well-aimed could do the job of stopping a small intruder. For larger ones, his staff, a wooden club with nails in its head, was good defense.

“I am the good shepherd,” says Jesus. I know my sheep by name. And they recognize my voice.

Many years ago, when I was a pastor in upstate New York we decided to do a multi-media Christmas pageant. Our plan was to take the costumed children to the neighboring farms, and, in costume, photograph them in a real barn. We also planned on having our little shepherds photographed with a real flock of sheep.

After calling around we found a farm with sheep on it, and a farmer willing to participate in our project. So, in advance of taking the children, I drove out to the farm one day to get the lay of the land. The farmer wasn’t going to be home when I need to come, and had told me to feel free to go out to the sheepfold myself.

So I did. The sheep were none to happy! As soon as they heard my voice, as soon as they saw me coming they scattered in a thousand directions. They were all in one fold, one fenced in enclosure, but they were most certainly not united!

Just as I was about to give up and go home, the farmer drove up. As she got out of her pick up, she called out to the sheep. And sure enough, even though I was still standing by the fence, they started to gather back together, and move towards the spot where the farmer, the shepherd if you will, was standing. They knew her voice, and they trusted her.

You see, what held that little flock of upstate sheep together, was the shepherd. Some of them were white, some were black, some were spotted. They were, I believe, more than one breed. They were young and old, male and female. Rams, ewes and lambs. But despite their differences, they had one shepherd, and because of that, they were one flock.

It is in this context that one of the things Jesus says makes the most sense. “I have other sheep,” he says to his apostles and the others who were listening. You aren’t the whole of it. “They 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.” (10:16)

Scholars believe that originally this referred to the gentiles, to the non-Jews who would later be part of the church. Despite the difference between Jews and Gentiles, says Jesus, they too are part of my flock.

Now as members of the flock we are even more varied than those upstate sheep. We are even more varied than those in the first century church. We come from a wide array of backgrounds. Some of us were born in this country, some in others. We are young and old, and in-between. We are liberals and conservatives, and those who can’t decide. We are gay and straight. We are rich and not-so rich and a few of us may even be poor. We are of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. We are well-educated and self-educated. Yet we are one flock. Held together by one shepherd.

Don’t misunderstand. I don’t mean me. Even though we pastors are often called shepherds, and our congregations are called our flocks, the real shepherd is Jesus. Keith Miller tells a story about one of his former pastors. One Sunday, as he met with the children of the church for their storytime, he began by talking about sheep. He told them how they need lots of guidance, and how the shepherd’s job was to protect them. Then he told the children that they were like sheep.

Miller writes: “[T]hen the minister put his hands out in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows said to the children, ‘If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd.’ He was pretty obviously indicating himself.

A silence of a few seconds followed. Then a young visitor said, ‘Jesus, Jesus is the shepherd.’ The young minister . . . was caught by surprise, [and] said to the little boy, ‘Well then, who am I?’ The little boy frowned and then said with a shrug, ‘I guess you must be a sheep dog.’”

The flock is held together not by its pastor, not by its talented lay leadership. We are not held together by our theology, nor by our denominational ties. No, the flock is held together by our common allegiance to the Good Shepherd.

William Barclay writes, “[U]nity comes from the fact, not that all sheep, are forced into one fold, but that they all hear, answer and obey one shepherd.” Like the

upstate sheep, we are in one fold, we are in one church. But what will hold us together is not the fact that we all hold membership in the same church, what will hold us together is our common allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is why our denomination is called the United Church *of Christ*. It is what we mean in our vision statement when we refer to ourselves as a *Community of Christ*.

Now, the truth is we have a variety of understandings of who Jesus was and is. Some of us believe him to be the Son of God. Some of us see him as the Messiah. We are comfortable saying he is both fully human, and fully divine. Others of us see him as a great teacher, as a wise rabbi, as one whose very life models how we can live a life of peace, love and justice. Some of us believe he was born of a Virgin, some of us can't imagine that to be true. Some of us think he was raised from the dead, body and all, others see it as merely a spiritual reality.

There are five-hundred –thirty-eight members in our church. If you were to survey the congregation and ask, “How do you understand who Jesus was and is?” we'd probably get five-hundred-thirty-*nine* answers! You see, what we have in common is not our understanding of who Jesus was nor our understanding of who he is, but rather, the fact that Jesus and his teachings provide us with the central truths for our lives. It is not a matter of common theology, or common doctrine, it is a matter of common commitment. A common commitment to hear, answer and obey the voice of Jesus.

This week, if someone asks you, “When was the last time you thought seriously about shepherds and sheep?” you can tell them, “Just last Sunday.” But more importantly, you can also tell them about this flock of sheep known as Saugatuck Congregational Church. You can tell them how we are united in our desire to do the work of Jesus in this time and this place. You can tell them that in our efforts to hear, answer and obey his voice, we are united as a *Community of Christ*. And because of that we can indeed, welcome all people, even as we continue to learn how best to love and serve God and neighbor.

Trust me on this. We sheep dogs tend to know a thing or two about shepherds and sheep. After all, we spend a lot of time in the fields!

Amen
John H. Danner