

ONE FLOCK, ONE SHEPHERD

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, May 3, 2009 – Easter IV
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, DC*

SCRIPTURE READING I John 3:16-18 (NRSV, adapted)

We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

SCRIPTURE READING John 10:11-16 (NRSV, adapted)

[Jesus said to his adversaries,] “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down their life for the sheep. The 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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.”

***SERMON HYMN**

God Is My Shepherd

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Over the years, I’ve learned some interesting things about actual sheep and shepherds and shepherding—not from direct personal experience, since I didn’t grow up on a farm, but from observation and reading. I’ve also learned some interesting things about myself as a metaphorical shepherd, as a pastor (the English word “pastor” being derived from the Latin word for shepherd).

I think my earliest observation of sheep and shepherds and shepherding happened at the Blue Hill Fair in Blue Hill, Maine, about 40 years ago, during the sheepdog trials. Traditional sheep herding in Europe and North America is a collaborative enterprise involving a single shepherd and a single sheep dog—often a border collie. During sheepdog trials, the shepherd guides his or her dog to herd a small flock of five sheep through a series of gates, something like a slalom. The shepherd often stands still, communicating with the dog through whistles or words or hand gestures, and the dog does most of the actual herding. Sometimes the five sheep stay close together and are relatively easy to herd; occasionally there will be one or two ornery sheep in this small flock that make it much harder on the dog and on the shepherd. I remember seeing a flock like this at the Blue Hill Fair: one ornery sheep was not the least bit interested in allowing the dog to rule the flock, and so it took this particular shepherd and border collie team much longer to get the sheep through the gates and to the finish line—by which time the poor dog was completely exhausted.

(I once heard a Presbyterian judicatory executive try to persuade us clergy not to think of *ourselves* as shepherds, but rather to think of Jesus as the shepherd and pastors as Jesus' sheepdogs. I'm probably no more interested in thinking of myself as a dog than you are in thinking of yourselves as sheep.)

Growing up in the suburbs in the 1950's, I had no direct experience of life on a farm, so I suppose that when I heard the words of the 23rd Psalm or the portrayal of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, I would have imagined "an [idyllic], bucolic scene of rolling green hills and lush meadows, over which the fluffy (and remarkably clean) sheep roam with their serene (if slightly bored) shepherd."¹ What I observed at the sheepdog trials at the Blue Hill Fair was quite different from this serene bucolic scene.

In first-century Palestine, Jesus' use of shepherd imagery to convey his ministry would have evoked in the minds of his hearers a scene quite different from either the lush meadows of rural North America or the somewhat dusty fairgrounds at the Blue Hill Fair. To this day, shepherds in the Middle East do not use dogs to help them herd their sheep. The rolling hills in many parts of Jordan that I saw a few years ago were mostly brown, not green; and sources of drinking water were few and far between. It was not an easy task for a shepherd to find green pastures or still waters for a flock of sheep. The shepherd was often right in the middle of the flock, and no doubt smelled strongly of sweat and sheep.

In Jesus' time, in order to keep the flock safe at night, a shepherd would create a temporary fenced-in sheepfold, and once the sheep were in the fold, the shepherd would sleep on the ground across the entrance to the fold.

"Shepherds [in Jesus' time] had a hard life. To make sure that their sheep had enough food and water, they had to roam far from home, and they paid a heavy price for it. They were exposed to the elements, and suffered from heat during the day and cold during long, sleepless nights guarding the flock from human and animal predators. Their mothers, wives, and daughters were in turn more vulnerable to predators, and that's a major reason that shepherds were generally thought of as dishonorable characters, leaving their families so exposed. If, after all that, a shepherd lost too many sheep to illness, injury, [predators,] starvation, or dehydration, the whole family would perish -- the flock's welfare really was the shepherd's own."²

Until this year, I had never really noticed that Jesus' words about shepherding in this lectionary passage from John's Gospel are directed not toward his followers but toward his adversaries—his adversaries in this particular context being the Pharisees. It's quite likely that in using shepherd imagery, Jesus was alluding to a passage from the prophet Ezekiel that is highly critical of the "shepherds of Israel," the leaders who were responsible for the people's well-being but instead sought only to secure their own well-being:

¹ Sarah Dylan Breuer, lectionary blog for Easter IV, year B. Accessed online on 04-30-09 at <http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/ezekiel/>.

² Ibid.

“The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them—to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals” (Ezekiel 34:1-5 NRSV).

That’s a pretty harsh indictment, as is Jesus’ indirect indictment of the Pharisees in comparing them with “the hired hand, who sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.”

Fast forward from the first century to the twenty-first century: the relationship between a shepherd and a flock is a longstanding traditional image for the relationship between a pastor and a congregation. There are good shepherds—and Jesus is the embodiment, the true image of the good shepherd. There are good pastors who genuinely care for their congregations, who are concerned to guide their congregations in the way of Jesus and to protect them from the metaphorical wolves of the world.

There are also irresponsible shepherds who feed themselves instead of feeding the sheep. There are irresponsible pastors who fleece their flocks, so to speak. And there are the hired hand pastors, the free agent religious professionals, who aren’t so much afraid of wolves, but are always on the lookout for greener pastures, so to speak. (In fact, most religious professionals, myself included, occasionally behave more like hired hands than like good shepherds.)

Those of us clergy who make our living as intentional interim ministers like to think of ourselves as good shepherds—even though we are temporary or transitional shepherds. Not only are we called to engage in the five ordinary tasks of ministry: preaching, teaching, congregational care, outreach, administration. We are also called to guide our congregations through the five developmental tasks of churches that are in transition to new pastoral leadership. You can read about these tasks, and my assessment of how we’re doing, as shepherd and flock, in working on them, in my most recent report to the church council.

Suffice it to say this afternoon that the flock I have before me is a pretty resilient and self-directed flock. Considering all the crises you’ve faced in the past two and a half years, you are doing quite well in staying together as a flock; you haven’t let yourselves be scattered by the wolves of these crises. In the words of an Alban Institute author, there have been times when you have understood that “crisis can be a liberating moment because it carries with it

permission to change.”³ (In the past two and a half years, you’ve probably already had enough “liberating moments” to last a lifetime!)

There is one more learning for us to take from today’s text about the shepherd and the flock—and that is Jesus’ word about the openness of the shepherd and the flock to welcoming new sheep into the fold. “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.”

To move from the metaphorical to the mundane: in your commitment to building the beloved community among yourselves, you are called to be a unique Christian community of welcome and hospitality, for seekers as well as for believers.

In the jargon of today’s sociology of religion, the word “seekers” is a catch-all term encompassing those many folk who are looking for a faith community where they’ll feel at home. Some seekers come from a non-religious background; others come from a religious background from which they are disaffected. Suzanne Strempek Shea, the author of *Sundays in America – A Yearlong Road Trip in Search of Christian Faith*, is among the disaffected. Disillusioned by the Roman Catholic Church in which she was raised, she’s been searching among a wide variety of Protestant churches for the ideal congregation—and, not surprisingly, she hasn’t found it yet.

Here, in her own words, is her vision of a perfect church: “a community that welcomed me warmly, didn’t give a whit about my politics or lifestyle, gave tons of whits about the social justice needs locally and beyond, contained little or no hierarchy, allowed congregants a say in decisions large and small, offered a spiritual message inspired by love rather than fear, and did all this in an art-filled space that rang with awesome music.”⁴

Think about it: do these words describe a congregation that you know? Look in the mirror. You won’t see a perfect church, but you will see a flock where this particular wandering sheep would be welcomed warmly and where she might well find herself at home. Look in the mirror. You’ll visualize a flock whose Good Shepherd is Jesus of Nazareth who is called Christ. Look carefully in the mirror, and you’ll see one flock, one shepherd, always welcoming to new sheep.

³ John H. Hewett, “Creativity in Crisis – Responding to Community Hardship from Congregational Health,” in *Congregations*, Spring 2009, p. 27.

⁴ Quoted in a review of this book by Pamela Fickenscher, in *Congregations*, Spring 2009, p. 40.