

The Lord is my Shepherd

(Preached by Elder Ray Dabney)

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John 10:11-18; Ps. 23

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One of my favorite metaphors for Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He lays down his life for the sheep—he knows his own and his own know him. He leads his sheep beside still waters and makes them lie down in green pastures.

However, for me, there is one problem with this metaphor for Jesus—it assumes his followers—you and I-- are sheep. And I know some of you will disagree with me, but to be honest, don't most of us think of sheep as stinky, untidy, dumb animals that only live to be fed and slaughtered?

Well, my brother-in-law's father, Ben, has raised sheep all of his life in Southern Oklahoma, and I know there are some sheep people here in this congregation that could probably tell me a whole lot about sheep. But one day, when I was talking to Ben, he told me that sheep really were not dumb

animals at all! He said it was the cattle ranchers who were responsible for spreading that ugly rumor and all because sheep don't behave like cows!

According to Ben, cows are herded from the rear by hooting cowboys with cracking whips, but that will not work with sheep at all. Stand behind a sheep making loud noises and all they will do is run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You *push* cows, he said, but you *lead* sheep, and they will not go anywhere that someone else does not go first—namely, their shepherd—who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right.

Images of sheep and their shepherds are used a lot in the Bible, because sheep represented the livelihood and the chief wealth of the nomadic pastoral people of the Bible. Sheep provided them with food to eat, milk to drink, wool for clothing, hides for tents and skin for writing upon.

The nature of sheep is that they are affectionate, un-aggressive, relatively defenseless. These large flocks in biblical times represented these nomadic peoples livelihood and were in constant need of care and supervision.

Their primary needs and support came from the shepherd; and since the family depended on this flock for their survival, the care of the flock was committed to a son, a daughter or, if needed, to a most trusted servant.

A characteristic of sheep is that they are joined with others as a flock and a shepherd tends the whole flock. In the early morning hours, if the shepherd had not slept with the sheep the night before, he went to the fold and called his sheep. Each shepherd had his own distinctive call to the sheep—it may have been a special trill or whistle, or a particular tune on a particular reed pipe. His sheep would recognize his call and they come out and follow him. Sheep that belonged to another shepherd would pay no attention to a strange voice.

The shepherd then led his flock into pastures and there they spent the day—and sometimes the night as well. They were never left alone. The sheep is a very timid animal, I'm told, and is especially afraid of swift moving water. In fact, they will not drink from moving water, so the shepherd had to led them to still water or dam up a small stream to form a small pool from which they may drink.

Sheep have no sense of direction and cannot find their way home like a horse or a dog can. Sheep also have very poor eyesight as well. In Palestine, the fields were quite hilly and often treacherous with steep inclines and gorges, so, it was the duty of the shepherd to lead his flock through these dangers and guard against predators that were waiting to snatch away a young lamb. Yet—sheep do not fear being lost or attacked by predators.

The shepherd developed an incredibly close and intimate relationship with his flock. Sheep tend to grow fond of their shepherds—not unlike the relationship some of us may form with our family pet.

At night, when the sheep were led home to the fold, the shepherd set out a bowl of olive oil and a jar of cool water by the gate. The shepherd then examined each sheep individually as they entered the sheep gate and rubbed oil into the scratches and wounds made by the rough rocks or briars during they day—anointing them with oil—the Middleeastern way of healing wounds.

Then, each sheep sunk his nose into the jar and drank deeply from the cool refreshing water. When all the sheep were counted and at rest and

protected by the fold, the shepherd draped his staff across the gate and slept close by, always facing the sheep.

The Bible uses the imagery of sheep for those who hear and follow the voice of Jesus. You can see why, can't you? A shepherd takes very good care of his flock.

And you know, regardless of what Ben said—from what we heard in today's lesson—I think sheep do seem to be pretty dumb animals. Do they really have to be made to lie down in green pastures? Do they really have to be led to still water to drink? And on top of all that—I understand they smell pretty bad, too!

The point I'm trying to make is this: The psalmist understood all a shepherd does for his sheep—the love and care and attention the shepherd pays to his flock. Jesus understood this concept too, and called himself the Good Shepherd in our Gospel reading. So, if Jesus was willing to lay down his life for the sake of these dumb, stinky animals, if Jesus thought the love shown

to the sheep by their shepherd was great, then, how much more love does Jesus have for us?

For us, who sometimes act like dumb, smelly sheep, for us who sometimes refuse to listen to or be led by Jesus, **for us Jesus died**. Jesus loves us so much that he did give up his life for us.

He came so that we might know and live in the love of the Good Shepherd, whose goodness and mercy does follow us all the days of our lives—from the moment of our cry at birth and our new birth in water and in spirit, to our last day on earth—even if sometimes in between we act like dumb, smelly sheep. We are always loved and cared for and forgiven by the good shepherd who gives us the abundant life. Who could resist being a sheep if one could be tended by such a shepherd?

Indeed, the good shepherd has given all that is needed—good food, good water, and good paths. What else could an average sheep want?

Because the shepherd is generous, the sheep—you and I-- live a safe, trust-filled life, surrounded by generosity.

Being a sheep means that **we** belong to the flock. Sheep left out on their own will perish—eaten by wolves or left to wander aimlessly. We belong to the flock not because we are certain of God, but because God is certain of us, and no one is able to snatch us out of God's hand.

You know, you cannot follow a shepherd by yourself. Sheep are part of a flock. We are a part of this flock at First Presbyterian Church. We all know that we act like sheep sometimes, too. And, well, sheep are, sheep. At times, they panic easily and refuse to be pushed. They make most of their decisions based on their appetites and they tend to get into head-butting contests for no reason at all. But my advice is to stick with the flock. It is where the shepherd can be found, which makes it your best bet not only for survival, but for joy and abundant life.

And if sometimes you have trouble hearing the voice of your shepherd, be patient with yourself—because some days it sounds like a whistle, and some days like a cluck; some days it sounds like a love song and some days like a curse. Jesus doesn't shout out commands and directions to us. He

knows what we are capable of and wants to encourage us to go ahead and act on our good judgment.

The shepherd's voice is not a voice that always speaks in words, much less complete sentences, but it can usually be heard sometime between your getting up and your lying down each day, leading you beside the still waters, restoring your soul.

We are God's beloved, those for whom Jesus laid down his life. And Jesus invites those who have been so loved to shepherd others, to love as we have been loved. We are called to share the love of the Good Shepherd with everyone we meet. The 30th of this month—Sunday after next—is Rally Day. I challenge each of you to bring a friend or a neighbor or a stranger to church with you that day. Welcome a fellow sheep into our flock so that they may know the Good Shepherd, too.

When we love others as Christ loved us, we honor the One who is our Good Shepherd, we honor the One who leads **us** beside still waters and restores our soul, the One who leads **us** on right paths, the One who anoints

us so that our cup overflows. The Lord is our Shepherd and invites us to shepherd others so that goodness and mercy might follow us all the days of our life and that we might dwell in the house of the Lord forever. All glory and honor be to you, Christ Jesus, our friend, our savior and our Good Shepherd. Amen.