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Do I Really Wanna Be A Sheep

Texts: **Psalm 23**; **John 10: 11-18**; Thomas Merton, from *The Seven Storey Mountain*

This is Good Shepherd Sunday. We're talking about shepherds and sheep. Sadly, it has to be admitted that sheep are not the smartest animals on the planet. In the thinking department they seem to be a few lambs short of a flock, if you know what I mean. If they aren't watched, they have the bad habit of going down into fast flowing rivers to drink where their fur gets wet, and, as anyone who has ever been caught in a rainstorm wearing a wool sweater can confirm, wool, when wet, weighs a wot, er, a lot. A wet sheep will sink into the river and drown unless it is rescued. It's for that reason that the 23rd Psalm, which we heard a moment ago, makes a big thing about the good shepherd leading the sheep beside still waters. Better chance of survival! That's also why shepherds have that crooked staff: to pull sheep out of water or bushes where they can get in trouble. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me, says the Psalmist. And so it is.

And about that staff. It's not about people the shepherd has hired, whom you might meet at the shepherd's annual staff party! It's also a much-needed implement for a shepherd. Sheep will wander off into thorns without much thought. And once they get caught up in thorn bushes, since their number one defense, their only defense, really, is to run away when threatened, they are in a bad place. Wool and thorns are like natural Velcro; it's not easy to get them apart! That's why the good shepherd leads the sheep into green pastures, where the rather brownish looking thorns are more easily seen, or, better yet, completely absent.

It's also why having a rod for fighting off predators is a good idea for the shepherd, since the sheep can contribute so little to their own defense. Sheep are like Gilbert and Sullivan's Duke of Plaza Toro: "*In enterprise of martial kind, when there was any fighting, he led his regiment from behind, he found it less exciting. When away his regiment ran, his place was at the fore-o, that celebrated, cultivated, under-rated nobleman, the Duke of Plaza Toro! When to evade destruction's hand, to hide they all proceeded, no soldier in that gallant band hid half as well as he did!*" Well, that's a sheep for you: run away and hide is about all they've got!

And although they are herd animals, sheep have this annoying habit of wandering off. That's why modern shepherds are always monitoring their sheep. How many are missing? Which ones have wandered off and which ones are still hanging around?

Now, sheep are also very useful for their wool, which helps to keep us warm, for their dung,

which fertilizes our fields, and for their meat, which fills our bellies. So it's not like sheep don't have anything going for them. They can be very helpful to have around. And the Bible portrays people as sheep on a pretty regular basis.

But do I really want to be a sheep? I mean, think about it. Almost all of the metaphors we use in English dealing with sheep are not good. You don't have to read Twitter or Facebook for long before you find, "Wake up, sheeple!" in one of your friend's feeds. Sheep are unthinking followers often led astray. Sheep are led like, well, sheep to the slaughter. We try to teach our teenagers not to be like sheep and just follow the crowd, but to think for themselves. In Britain they say things like, "Be a lamb and get me some marmalade, would you?" meaning both "be sweet and help me out" and also "do what I say, won't you?" So being a sheep isn't regarded as the best thing in our society. We probably wouldn't choose to be a sheep if we had the choice.

But what's the alternative? To be a wolf? To prey on the innocent lambs with our cunning? That doesn't sound good, either! In fact, people who prey on others are the very people that the Bible would say had gone most astray, who were, in that going-astray respect, most sheep-like!

The key here is to recognize that the image of shepherd and sheep in the Bible is just that, an image, a metaphor. And in every metaphor, which is just a comparison not using like or as, some parts are more apt than others. For one thing, Jesus as the good shepherd isn't raising us up to use as meat, for example, as if life were some Twilight Zone episode! There are some parts of the metaphorical image that aren't meant to be taken literally! But there are parts that can give us insight into who we are before God. It must be tremendously frustrating for God that we, like sheep, are continually going astray, each of us to his, or her, own way. Instead of staying in the nice green pasture of virtue that the Lord has laid out for us, we think to ourselves, "Hey, it might be nice over in those sinful brambles, too. I think I'll go over there and take a look." We get taken in with envy for example: we think the grass is always greener in our neighbor's lawn, which is a very sheep-like way of looking at things. Instead of sticking to the path that the Lord has laid out for us, we think, "I'm going to go my own path. That Bible stuff is old-fashioned and pretty stuck-up fuddy-duddy. I think striking out on my own might be just as good." Now, we don't literally think that, probably, but our actions make it seem as if we do, at least, apparently, from God's perspective. We have a whole city, Las Vegas, dedicated to the proposition that shiny lights and flashing machines and ringing bells can induce people to play games that are literally rigged against them. Woo hoo! Roll those dice! Excitement! What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, baby!" And then, like sheep, we end up getting fleeced. The still waters and the green pastures probably look kind of boring to the sheep, too, just before they get into trouble.

And it's not just in sinful ways that we get lost. One time Jesus looked out over the crowds that were following him and the Scripture says that "he had compassion on them because they were

troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

So many of us just end up wandering through life kind of aimlessly, without knowing the goal or seeing the purpose of it all. “Why am I here? What’s the meaning of my life? Who knows! Party on!” That’s pretty sheep-like, too. Or even in less obvious ways, where we just go through life with workday and weekend, trying to make ends meet until we meet our end.

Jesus wants more for us. Jesus wants us to follow him in creating a life of love and service, a life measured not in minutes, but in people we have cared for. Being a sheep in Jesus’ flock doesn’t mean mindlessly following, but mindfully following him into a life with a purpose of serving God through serving others. Being a sheep might not be so bad after all.

The Bible metaphor of sheep is very one-sided if we don’t look at the other side, too, that of shepherd. The metaphor comes as a whole. How can we know if it’s good to be a sheep if we don’t know about the shepherd? Is the shepherd like a hired hand, like the shepherds that Clive Harffy saw in Segovia, Spain, who were being berated by the owner of their sheep because they had abandoned their charges to go to a local fiesta, and while they were off partying, the owner of the sheep had found his flock wandering through the streets of the village? Or is the shepherd one who sees keeping his flock safe a matter of life and death, who is ready to lay down his life to protect his sheep since they are an investment in time and care that his family is counting on? Jesus says that the Good Shepherd is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, and that surely makes a huge difference in one’s willingness to be a sheep.

Too many of those who offer themselves to us as shepherds are in it for our wool or our metaphorical meat, our money. In fact, Jesus alone seems able to offer himself as our shepherd having already shown his willingness to give his life for us. Moreover, our recognition that we do, in fact, have some sheep-like qualities, that we do tend to wander off into the trouble of sin, that we can easily find ourselves just going through the motions of a day and not living with a purpose and a goal, that recognition can help us to see that, like it or not, a really good shepherd would be very helpful to have in life. Nor should we let our modern and rather more impersonal way of shepherding keep us from seeing what the Biblical metaphor is trying to get at.

The economist E. F. Schumacher tells about the old shepherd who said, “Don’t count the sheep or they won’t thrive.” What the shepherd meant by this was that putting a number on a sheep meant that it became something abstract, something less than individual, less than the animal it was. Perhaps it’s for this reason that our Scripture passage today about the Good Shepherd stresses so much the intimate relationship between the Shepherd and the sheep. They are not numbers to him, for he calls them all by name. Jesus doesn’t care about the numbers in the pews. Instead, he cares about Tom and Kirby and Jean and Nancy and Harris and Janet and Jenx and Stacey and Sean and ... well, you get the picture.

And we don't really get the difference between a shepherd and a hireling facing off against a thief that the Scripture is trying to drive home to us - it's just not part of our experience, so we don't really get it. Instead of a shepherd or a hireling facing off against a thief, we might instead think of something more familiar to us, say the difference between a parent and a babysitter – no matter how brave and caring-- and what they would do in the face of a home invasion. A babysitter would likely hide, maybe try to call the police or shout for help. But if a parent saw a home invader trying to take their child, the parent would be up and fighting the invader with a holy fury to the last ounce of their strength and with the last drop of their blood.

The parent would not hesitate to lay down their life for their child and would count it a fair deal if the child survived and was safe.

On Good Shepherd Sunday, the Scripture tells us that Jesus is no mere babysitter for his followers. He is a parent, willing to lay down his life in the face of the greatest threat to our survival in this world and the next, the invasion of God's world by sin and death. That is who our Shepherd is, and I, for one, am grateful to be a part of his flock, for I know his voice and I hear him calling me by name. And I hope and pray you do, too.

Amen