

Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday, May 9, 2022

I spent my childhood in a rural area near Victoria, B.C. But although there was lots of farming, there wasn't much sheep farming. So I didn't grow up knowing much about sheep. I knew that my Dad used it as an insult to refer to people who went along with the crowd without thinking too much about it. This new insult that's out, "sheeple," is along the same lines. The idea is that sheep are not bright and just do as they're told. And some people (those who disagree with the speakers) are the same. Not nice and usually not true either.

Anyway, I did some research about sheep. Just a little, on Wikipedia. I discovered some interesting things. Sheep are actually not that dumb. They're almost as bright as pigs, and brighter than cows, apparently. They can recognise a human face and remember it for years. They can also distinguish between other individual sheep and can learn a whole lot of other things they need for survival. From each other. Yes, they do tend to flock together and follow their leaders, but this is also really good for their survival, especially against any predators. Harder to pick them off one by one if they stay together.

Flocking together is one of the most important things about sheep. They like to stay in flocks. If they're separated from the flock they can become stressed. Like us, isolated and stressed in covid times. And sheep do tend to follow the leader. Which is usually a good thing, unless an uppity young ram tries to lead some of them off somewhere. That's what sheep dogs are for: making sure no one breaks away and a bunch follow them. Shepherds used bellwethers, neutered rams. They would put a bell around the neck of the lead wether, because they knew all the rest would follow him and they could hear where the sheep were just by listening for the bell.

Of course, human shepherds used this flocking tendency to lead the sheep to safe places: new green pastures, still waters, places away from wolves. And because the shepherd fed them and cared for them, they would trustingly follow the him along. They recognised his face, knew his voice, and were content to follow him, where they wouldn't follow a stranger at all.

Well, in today's passage, or just before it, Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd and all the people as sheep. He says that the Jewish leaders don't believe he's the Messiah even though he's told them and done works that testify to it, and they don't believe because they are not his sheep. He says his sheep hear his voice and know him and follow him, and he gives them eternal life and keeps them safely.

So that's kind of the nub of it. When we are Jesus' followers, we hear his voice and we willingly follow him. Those who reject him, don't tend to recognise his voice, even when they hear it, and they tend to run away. Jesus told everyone the same things to start with. Of course, he gave extra teaching to his disciples afterwards. But he called them all the same way and he did signs and miracles in public, and some people decided to follow him and some didn't. The ones who decide to follow him spend time with him, get to know him, recognise his voice, notice what he's doing, and the trusting relationship, the bond, is strengthened. Those who walk away, don't hear, don't see and don't recognise and see no reason to trust or believe.

We who are here this morning have pretty much all decided to follow Jesus. At the very least, we've decided to take a closer look. And because we're spending time with Jesus, listening to his voice in Scripture, singing his praises, taking our cares and concerns to him in prayer, we get to know him. Our eyes are more open to notice what he's up to in our own lives and all around us. Because we recognise Jesus, we are more likely to notice him when he shows up. You don't tend to notice or recognise someone you don't know. We recognise Jesus' presence in the bread and wine, the way he feeds us with his own essence, his own self.

We also recognise his presence in one another. The flock imagery is important, too. Christians are not meant to go it solo. We are meant to be part of the Body of Christ, part of the church. We stick together because it works much better that way. We are safer from things that will draw us off from our Good Shepherd. We can look out for each other, recognise each other, help each other, keep each other warm. And just share in the companionship of those who follow the same shepherd.

I was trying to think how on earth I could tie sheep and shepherds in with Mother's Day. But then it occurred to me that there is a similarity, in that strong connection. You know, when a baby is born, it doesn't take more than a few minutes for that baby to bond with its Mom. Babies, not just human babies either, are hard wired to bond with their Moms. Moms are also hard wired to bond with their babies. The species would not survive if they didn't. Babies, of any sort, are not capable of looking after themselves: they need their Moms. And their Moms, unless they've been deeply damaged by life, love them and feed them and care for them and keep them out of trouble, as much as they can.

There are quite a few references in the Bible to God as our Mother. That may surprise you since we tend to focus on the Father image mostly. But in the Bible, God often speaks through the prophets to say she gave birth to Israel and nursed her, cared for her, held her by the hand while she took her first steps, and loved her, agonized over her, wept over her even. Of course, they also said God lost her temper with her children when they were persistently bad, but still these tender, loving passages remain.

So many images throughout Scripture of God tenderly caring for us, Jesus tenderly caring for us: watching over us, feeding us, leading us in the best paths, rescuing us from danger. Or trying to. Unless we stubbornly refuse to come back, as we often do. And always this bond reinforced by spending time together. Which is what we do when we gather for worship, with God our Mother, God our Good Shepherd. It's what we do when we read the Bible and pray at home, or whenever we gather with the rest of the flock, the rest of the siblings, in any way.

Did any of you go to Bishop Sue's enthronement, when she took over as Diocesan Bishop? I can't remember what we call it now but it used to be called the enthronement. She preached herself and her theme was shepherds and sheep. The bishop is the chief pastor of the Diocese, just as priests are pastors. Did you know that pastor is the Latin word for shepherd?

But Bishop Sue said she didn't regard us as sheep and she was more interested in empowering us and helping us grow into Christian leaders ourselves than she was in keeping us as a good, obedient flock. It was interesting. When she was seated on her Cathedra, the enormous bishop's chair that gives a Cathedral church its name, she hopped right up again and started sharing authority. She named and commissioned the archdeacons and regional deans and shared her authority with them. And other people, too.

And I think that's also important. A Mom doesn't want her kids to remain babies forever, or toddlers forever or teenagers forever. We want our kids to grow up to become responsible, caring, decent adults, able to take care of themselves and our grandchildren. There's a limit, of course, to what shepherds can actually do with sheep in this respect, which is where this image breaks down and the Mom image is better. But in the church, as a pastor or shepherd, my job is not to keep everyone as a sheep, just blindly following the crowd or blindly following me. Like a Mom, I want everyone to keep growing up to their full potential.

This is why I've taught so many training courses and got so many new people into different ministries. Because I want you to grow up into your full potential. It's why I encourage you to have ideas and to pursue them. As long as it's not something that goes against our core values. It's why I encourage you to listen to each other and respect each other's voices and learn from each other. It's why I ask you for feedback. I only wish I got more from you.

Because our Christian life, while it does involve hanging out with the Good Shepherd and following the Good Shepherd, doesn't actually mean just passively going along with whatever's happening. It means contributing as an adult, fully participating in the journey. Taking our share in it.

And this is important because right now, in this time and place, the flock is on the move. The last two years have moved us into a very different time and space than where we were before Covid. This happens in history. Sometimes there are periods of long, slow growth. Sometimes there are leaps and bounds. We are just in the middle of a leap. We are

not the same people we were and our church is not the same as it was and our society is not the same.

And in this new situation, the Good Shepherd is working to lead us to new pastures. As shepherds do when the old pasture has been overgrazed and the water has been muddied. They lead to a new place. Not hugely different usually - still green grass and still waters to drink - but noticeably different. And right now, we can't see what that new place is going to look like. We're not there yet.

As a church, we need to be alert to signs that show us where Jesus is leading us. We need to listen carefully for his voice. We need to be willing to follow him. And we need to take our part as mature Christians to reshape the church of the future. We need to partner with Jesus in this work. And we need to make sure the whole flock comes along and no one is left behind. For all these things we need to pay attention. Pay attention to each other. Pay attention to Jesus. Watch and pray. Because we live in exciting times and what happens next depends very much on us hearing what Jesus is saying to us as clearly as possible. And making ourselves willing to follow where he leads.

So listen, pray, think about where the church is going. Where is Jesus calling us to follow? And what can we do to get there? What are the new pastures that are opening up? Where is our Shepherd leading us right now? Let's be attentive to listen and eager to follow.