

“Sheep, Shepherds, and Abiding Love”
May 3, 2009

1 John 3:16-22
John 10:11-16

I confess – I’ve never been very comfortable with all the good shepherd imagery in the Bible and in Christianity. Some of the discomfort may simply come from unfamiliarity. I didn’t know any shepherds – or sheep, for that matter – in my childhood, and I don’t think I know any shepherds now, unless, of course, some of you have been hiding your shepherd-ness from your minister!

My unease with this good shepherd metaphor goes deeper than unfamiliarity, though. If God or Jesus is the good shepherd, that must mean that I’m a sheep, and I’m not sure I want to be a sheep. I don’t seem to have a particularly high regard for sheep. Even though watching the movie *Babe* several times has helped soften my stereotypes about sheep, they still don’t strike me as especially interesting or intelligent or attractive. Then it gets worse, as I remember that not only are sheep the source of wool, but they’re also the source of something known as *lamb*, as in rack of lamb. The reasons not to be a sheep keep adding up, so thanks, but no thanks.

Of course, the image of the good shepherd, like so much of the Bible, is not meant to be taken literally, so we’re not actually being invited to think of ourselves as sheep. Instead, the image invites us to see in God or in Jesus the best qualities of a shepherd – devotion, care, steadiness of presence, tenderness – and then to understand that those best human qualities are but glimpses of the love, tenderness, and care that the Holy One has for all of creation.

Even with that understanding of the metaphor of the good shepherd, I’m still uneasy with it. I’m especially uneasy with it as applied to Jesus and, then by extension, to the pastors of congregations. (The very word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.”) I’m uneasy with the separation, the difference, the lack of mutuality, the lack of give and take that the image of a good shepherd with his or her sheep conjures in my mind. If Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep ... if I am the pastor/shepherd and you are the sheep, then there is so much difference and distance between us that it’s almost as if we’re two different species. And that’s just a bit too much to swallow.

But just as this image and other images of the Bible are not meant to be taken literally, this image is not meant to be taken in isolation, either, which is what I’m often doing when I’m reacting negatively to it. Taking this image in the larger context of John’s Gospel and of this morning’s reading from 1 John, I (and we) can come to have a different sense of this whole shepherd, sheep, pastor, flock thing.

As the Gospel of John tells the story, on Jesus’ last night with his disciples before he was crucified, he gives them a new commandment. “This is my commandment,” Jesus says, “that you love one another as I have loved you.” Love one another as I have loved you. Care for one another as I have cared for you. Nurture one another as I have nurtured you. Protect one another as I have protected you. In other words, *shepherd one another as I have shepherded you.*

What a commandment. What an invitation. What a challenge. *What a gift.* As I understand the image of the good shepherd in the context of Jesus’ commandment that

we love one another as he loves us, we are all shepherds, and we are all sheep. There is no “us” and no “them.” We all need to be cared for, and we all need to do the caring. Where, before, I could see no mutuality, no give and take, now I see nothing but mutuality and give and take. We are called to lay down our lives for one another, to help one another. *And* we are called to receive the gift of one another’s lives and to receive one another’s help. We are called to let love abide, so that when we have what 1 John describes as “the world’s goods” we will help our brothers and sisters in need. *And* we are called to let love abide by accepting the gifts of wisdom and truth that those who do not have the world’s goods have to offer.

We are truly blessed this morning to have two guests with us, to join us in worship and in fellowship after our worship service. Both Margaret Trost, of the What If? Foundation, and Seth Donnelly, from the Haiti Action Committee, are people in whom God’s love does truly abide. They have come to know and love and serve and bless many of our brothers and sisters in Haiti, who have in turn come to know and love and serve and bless Margaret and Seth.

In the stories and grace that Margaret and Seth have to share, good shepherds abound. Their work is no one-sided affair, with virtuous, generous, open-hearted Americans helping poor, pitiful, unfortunate Haitians. No, their work is not some stereotype of supposedly more civilized people helping those who are less civilized. Instead, their work is filled with grace and mutual blessing, with human beings in need of community and blessing and grace coming to know and love other human beings in need of community and blessing and grace.

Their work calls them to be, in essence, good sheep, as much as it calls on them to be good shepherds. Margaret and Seth may indeed have more of the world’s goods than do the people they know and love in Haiti, but that does not mean that they or we are the only ones who have something to give. They and we are in need of what the people of Haiti have to give. And so I have asked Margaret and Seth to share with us this morning their work and their stories of how they themselves have been shepherded by the very people they also seek to care for and nurture.

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