

“Moving Beyond a Romanticized View of Sheep and Shepherds”

John 10:11–18

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I have learned over the years that images and illustrations that work really well in one setting do not work at all in other settings. For example, in Winston-Salem, I made the mistake of using a line from a Flannery O’Connor short story in my sermon title and sermon — warthog from hell. It wasn’t the use of the term “hell” that was problematic. It was the use of the word “warthog” because Wally the Warthog was the mascot for the Single A baseball team in town at the time, which I fully supported and even blessed the building of the new stadium, along with Hank Aaron. But a church member who was something of a father figure for the players thought I was going to say something negative.

In another setting, I was preaching a series of sermons on The Sermon on the Mount and made numerous references to Dante’s Divine Comedy, also referring to it as a trilogy, since it is divided into three parts. A woman in the church asked Dana for the name of the movie I had referred to in one of the sermons, and I had referred to a movie, but the woman said, “No, I mean that three-part movie.” “Oh,” Dana said, that was not a movie.” It was an epic poem completed by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri in 1321. Some images and illustrations that work in one setting do not work in others.

I think about this reality today because the images of sheep and shepherds are central to our biblical readings, and we are very familiar with the concept of God being our Shepherd who leads us in right paths, and Jesus being our Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. But while we may get the message on some level, most of us don’t know anything about sheep and shepherds or the world from which these images are drawn. We may have heard a little bit from a minister or theologian either from a pulpit or in a book, but don’t take what we preacher-types say about a subject that isn’t in our area of expertise at face value. “Trust and verify” should be your motto!

Our tendency is to romanticize both sheep and shepherds, and as a result, we may miss some of the nuances of what this imagery might say about who the God who was in Christ is. We think of sheep as cuddly animals, not aggressive, and downright cute when they are young. When Dana and I were in Williamsburg a couple weeks ago, there were numerous precious lambs following their mothers around. It is that time of year. But cute as they may be, they are messy animals, and some say not very smart, though this is disputed. We'll get to that a bit later. For now, the point is that sheep are not what we romanticize them to be.

Nor are shepherds what think of either. They are not business managers or leadership coaches, wise gurus or trained mentors. They are hard laborers in a messy line of work, those who spend their time looking after the safety of their animals, seeing to their needs, protecting them from harm, at times taking risks for them by keeping them from falling off cliffs or protecting them from predators.

Someone has suggested that shepherds are migrant farm workers, those who do essential work nobody else wants to do, and then get ridiculed and demeaned for doing so. Jesus the Good Shepherd sounds comforting. How does Jesus the Model Migrant Farm Worker sound?

What I am suggesting is that our romanticized view of sheep and shepherds may lead to an inaccurate or at least inadequate view of Jesus and us. In paying more attention to the details in this imagery, we may learn some additional things about who Jesus is or at least add depth to what we already know. What does it mean to say that he is a Good Shepherd? What kind of shepherd is he and for which sheep?

One thing a more informed understanding tells us is that there is a close relationship between sheep and shepherds, and this closeness enables shepherds to lead the sheep. In a sermon Barbara Brown Taylor preached on our reading from John, she says an acquaintance who grew up on a sheep farm dispelled the myth that sheep are dumb (referenced in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, p. 450). It was probably cattle ranchers who started that rumor, she says, because they couldn't drive sheep like they could cows. Sheep don't like to be driven, they will run around behind you, Barbara says.

But sheep can be led, especially by someone they know and trust. Sheep seem to consider shepherds part of the family. They will respond to a voice they recognize, trust that voice, follow that voice.

In our text, Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me... I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice.” Jesus is saying this is how he leads us, teaches and guides us — not by cracking a whip and demanding that we go, but by getting to know us as trusted friends and gently directing us to a better, more fulfilling way of life.

It’s like what the sheep pig Babe does in the film *Babe*. He herds sheep not by threatening them but by talking to them, developing a relationship with them. Most of us resist coercion, but we will follow someone we trust cares about us, has our best interests at heart, and knows things we do not. Jesus is the ideal Someone like this.

This may seem obvious to us, but it is not the Jesus many proclaim today. Fiery preachers proclaim a judgmental Jesus who drives people by fear. Politicians who seek to exploit religious ideation cozy up to these preachers and use random parts of their ideation to manipulate people in the name of God. The Jesus found in scripture, especially the Good Shepherd imagery, invites people into relationship with him, never coercing or driving with an emotional bullwhip, but always using love.

2 Corinthians 5:14 says this in the NIV — Christ’s love compels us... The NRSV translates — the love of Christ urges us on.... Jesus leads by love, not fear.

Another thing a more informed understanding tells us is that shepherds are focused on what is in the best interest of the sheep, all the sheep, especially those more vulnerable or at risk. The goal is to keep all the sheep well, but some require more attention than others. The shepherd doesn’t want to lose any sheep. So, there is a balance between care of the stronger and the weaker, but care is extended to all.

This is the kind of shepherd Jesus is. He spends an inordinate amount of time with the poor and marginalized — the blind and lame, tax collectors and prostitutes, women and Gentiles, lepers and demon-possessed. He even tells a parable about a shepherd leaving ninety-nine gathered sheep to find the one

that is lost (Luke 15:3-7). Crazy? That's what the scribes and Pharisees think, it's why they criticize Jesus, but they are the ones who need more help. This is how Jesus rolls. He is focused on the needs of the sheep, especially those who need more help.

He also extends concern to all the sheep, not just those others think should be included. As we have noted, he says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice." Some scholars think he is talking about including the Gentiles. Others suggest this points to the unity of the body of Christ — Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. Still others wonder if this is an inclusive claim that stands in contrast to the exclusive statement found in our reading from Acts. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12)." Could Jesus be including people of all faiths?

Whatever we make of this text, it reminds us of the need to allow the whole of scripture to shape our faith, not just one isolated verse we may not understand. The big picture message here is that Jesus is concerned with enlarging the tent of his people, not restricting it. *I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.* A shepherd wants to bring in and care for all the sheep. And while literal shepherds must discern which sheep belong to them and which belong to other shepherds, Jesus is the Good Shepherd to whom all the sheep belong. He includes all!

It is, of course, not the "all" part that troubles us, it is some of the people — our enemies, people who vote for the other party, root for the other team, disagree with us on the critical issues (the ones we decide are critical). But sheep don't get to decide which sheep stay and go, the shepherd does, and this Shepherd includes all, whether we like it or not.

There is one other thing a more informed understanding tells us. It concerns this matter of laying down life for the sheep. We know Jesus does this for all humankind, but does an ordinary shepherd do this for sheep? Who will look after the sheep then? Well, if their lives are at risk, the sheep will die anyway. So, does Jesus mean for us to take this seriously? He does. And 1 John 3:16 adds this word of challenge, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us — *and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.*"

Really? It's not what most Christians in our culture want to hear, but it is what the Bible teaches.

I remember running into a former classmate from college at a hamburger place in Louisville, Kentucky, when I was in seminary, and he was in med school. After we expressed joy at seeing each other, he felt a need to address the reason we hadn't done so in years. He had been part of the campus church I attended but then disappeared. He wanted to explain why. He thought we were too intense, almost cultlike. I pushed back but expressed appreciation for his honesty and wished him well.

Religion can become unhealthy when it focused on a personality, when people are required to give up their freedom, but the church I was a part of simply took Jesus' calling to service and sacrifice seriously. My friend, like many in churches today, wanted a little religion in his life, where and when it was convenient. He had no interest in a faith which requires all or a Jesus who lays down life and calls us to do so.

I remember another conversation from decades ago, this one with a colleague who had been on the other side of a discussion about LBGT issues in another state. I had been part of an effort to push back against an exclusive statement the writers didn't believe but issued to keep "conservative" churches and money. Ironically, those churches and that money left the structure anyway, right after the statement was approved. When I talked to this colleague, he said, "I don't have anything against these people. I'm just not sticking my neck out for them."

If he believed what was in the statement, I would have disagreed with him but respected his view, but this self-preserving position I could not respect. Sticking our neck out for others — LGBT people, persons of color, women in leadership, immigrants and refugees, persons with different abilities — is not a cult practice, it is what Jesus calls us to do.

When we move beyond a romanticized view of sheep and shepherds, we realize that while Jesus offers comfort and guidance, shepherding can also get messy, it can lead to laying down life. As the vulnerable sheep we are, we are glad Someone lays down his life for us, and we are privileged to participate in this ministry for others.