

## What the Sheep See

Sunday, May 12, 2019

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

John 10:22-30

There's a humorous prayer that goes like this: "Dear Lord, please make me into the person my dog thinks I am." Dogs are overjoyed at the sight of their people returning from a long day at work. Who wouldn't want to be the kind of person that everyone enthusiastically greets and can't wait to see? What makes a dog go insane with joy when seeing his human come through the door? How does a wise owner leverage that loyalty into good and consistent canine behavior? To understand that, you've got to know something about animal psychology and those who know it best are called "whisperers."

Cesar Millan is known as the dog whisperer because he has an uncanny knack for taking a problem dog and turning him into a happy, healthy, obedient best friend. Millan says it all comes down to understanding what a dog's basic wants and needs: exercise, discipline, and affection (in that order). It also has something to do with the master's demeanor, facial expressions, even a tilt of the head. Dogs are observant creatures. Understanding what a dog sees when he sees a human is key in training Fido to be a good dog. If you can get inside an animal's brain and help it act in its own best interests, you can become a "whisperer."

Today's gospel reading is not about what the dog saw, but what the sheep saw. Dogs are one of the smarter domestic animals: they can be trained to do anything from assisting a disabled person, to sniffing out a bomb, to sitting up and shaking hands (paws). Not so, with sheep. Sheep have a reputation for being skittish, for following the herd, and for not being all that bright. Maybe it's because they're a prey animal with no real natural defenses. Maybe it's because they mindlessly go along with the crowd. Whatever the reason, the image of a flock of sheep doesn't exactly call to mind a Mensa meeting. I've heard it said that there are three levels of stupidity in the world: dumb, dumber, and sheep.

Shepherds who work with sheep every day, don't see it that way however; they don't believe that sheep are stupid. They argue that sheep are among the more intelligent of the animals on the farm. Recent studies show that sheep have good memories and can differentiate between pictures of human faces up to two years after they have seen

them. While the sheep are not out in the field doing algebra, they are not the mindless dolts that non-shepherds might think. Good shepherds need to understand what the sheep see when they see the shepherd.

Australian shepherd John Powell is one such "sheep whisperer." When a severe drought reduced his flock and a snake killed his loyal sheepdog, it forced John to reconsider how to keep a herd of sheep in the most economical way. He restocked his farm with some new lambs, which his daughter tended. John noticed his daughter feeding them willow leaves, which is apparently like giving chocolate to a candy-crazed toddler. John also noticed that as these lambs got older, they would follow her anywhere, even if she wasn't doling out willow leaves. Once those older sheep became leaders of the flock, the herd would follow them as they followed John and his daughter.

Because he is recognized by the leaders of the flock, John is now able to herd as many as a thousand sheep at a time by himself with no help from dogs or motorcycles or any of the other things that other shepherds use to control sheep these days. It's a gentler way of shepherding that keeps the sheep calm and happy, and calm sheep produce better wool and meat. It's all about knowing the sheep and *being known by them*.

No wonder that Jesus chose the image of a shepherd — a "sheep whisperer" — who knows his sheep intimately and is known by them. Jesus wasn't the first to use this image, of course Israel's history reveals many shepherd-leaders whose whispering ability made a remarkable difference in the lives of God's people.

In Ezekiel 34, for example, the prophet compares the bad shepherd-kings of Israel who greedily "feed themselves" but not the sheep (v. 11) with God-the-Shepherd who makes the sheep "lie down" in safety (v. 15). God will seek the "lost," bring back the "strayed," bind up the "injured" and strengthen the "weak" as any good shepherd would do. To ensure the health of the flock, God promised to "set up one shepherd over them, my servant David" who shall "feed them and be their shepherd" (v. 23).

That Good Shepherd, of course, is Jesus, who is both son of David and Son of God. In today's gospel reading, Jesus picks up God's critique of Israel's bad shepherds (i.e., the Pharisees), and expresses again that the Good Shepherd knows and cares for the sheep even if it costs him everything. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (v. 11).

Unlike strangers and hired hands who treat the sheep like a mindless collective, exploiting them or bolting when things get tough, the Good Shepherd is intimately and symbiotically connected with his flock. It's no coincidence, then, that Jesus brings up his sheep whisperer credentials during the festival of the Dedication (Hanukkah) which celebrated the victory of the Maccabees over foreign Gentile invaders during the time between the Old and New Testaments. The Maccabees gave their lives in defense of the nation. Their devotion to God and the temple, prompted them to give everything to preserve God's people (vv. 22-23).

Jesus was about to do the same, but on an even greater scale and for an even greater flock, one that included the Gentiles who were not yet part of the "fold" (v. 16). The Jewish leaders wanted Jesus to openly declare that he was the Messiah, but Jesus declared instead that he was the "shepherd" God promised through Ezekiel (v. 24). Furthermore, says Jesus, the "works" he does in the name of God should be testimony enough (v. 25).

The Jewish leaders didn't see who Jesus really was because they didn't belong to his flock — *they didn't recognize his voice, his manner, his care, or his leadership* (v. 26). Instead they saw an itinerant preacher, a rabble-rouser, a malcontent, a radical, and a fraud. They saw someone who siphoned away the loyalty of the people. They saw someone who critiqued their self-righteousness and hypocrisy. In this sense, the sheep saw Jesus correctly. Jesus reveals them to be not sheep at all, but wolves in sheep's clothing. These leaders should have been the elders of the flock directing Israel to follow the Good Shepherd, but they failed like their predecessors in Ezekiel's day.

"My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me," says Jesus (v. 27). The sheep follow Jesus because they know they will receive the three things that sheep need to thrive: *to be well-fed, to be safe and not stressed, and to have someone looking out for them*. Jesus sums all that up in one sentence: "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (v. 28). This is the "abundant" life (v. 10) made possible because the Good Shepherd puts the needs of the sheep first.

As English shepherd James Rebanks says in his first rule of shepherding: "It's not about you. It's about the sheep and the land." Jesus demonstrates this like no other. When the sheep see Jesus, they see a shepherd who has their best interests at heart, and they know it because he is willing to die for them. "No one will snatch them out of my hand" (v. 28). Jesus can promise this because he is God's promised Good Shepherd; in fact, he is God

in person. "What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one" (vv. 29-30).

We who are part of Jesus' flock have heard the voice of Jesus "whispering" to us, but, like Jesus, we also have a shepherding task. We are sheep, but we are also under-shepherds who care for others and bring others into Jesus' fold where they can experience abundant, eternal life. To do that, we must be willing to care for the sheep like Jesus does, to know what they need, and to lead them well. Every one of us has a small flock we are given to tend, be it a family, a group of coworkers, a group of friends at school, or even a small group at church.

What do our "sheep" see when they look at us? We're called to hear the shepherd's voice and then, as leaders of the flock, to lead them in following Jesus. We do that by reflecting his care: ensuring that people are well-fed spiritually and physically; creating an environment of peace where people feel valued, cared for, and loved; and caring about the flock more than we care about ourselves. When we do that well, others will see and want to follow where we lead. Perhaps that will lead us to pray a different sort of prayer: "Lord, help me to be the kind of sheep that leads others to the Good Shepherd."

Prayer: Merciful God, who is more than we can ever imagine, give us a wider vision of the world; give us a broader view of justice; give us dreams of peace that are not defined by boundaries of geography or race or religion, or by the limitations of worldly structures and systems. Open our eyes and our ears that wherever we go, we may hear your voice calling us by name; calling us to serve, calling us to share, calling us to praise, so that we never give up on the promise of your kingdom, where the world is transformed, and all can enjoy life in all its fullness. Amen.

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