

Fourth Sunday after Easter
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
4-30-2023
John 10:1-10

A comingled heard near killorglin , County Kerry, Ireland

Each sheep can identify a particular sound or whistle

Each sheep can identify the smell of a particular sheep within its group, the smell of a mother, for example

Each sheep can identify the tone of their shepherd, specially if they grew up with the same shepherd or under shepherd

A few things I noticed

We have romanticized sheep

The tend to be rather stupid animals who would end in all sorts of dangers without a shepherd

Sheep are anxious animals, afraid of even the smallest of dogs, and terrified of all sorts of predators, including small predators. They need protection. When a sheep becomes scared, they become almost paralyzed. They drop to the ground and often defecate on themselves.

It takes a lot of effort and hard work to be a shepherd, especially at the beginning when your are training a heard for the first time.

We have romanticized the shepherds

We have associated shepherd with the gentle Jesus who is willing to die for his sheep: He sings to his sheep, he reads them poetry, he plays musical instruments for them.

In reality, Shepherds constantly hit their sheep in their rear end to get them to move. They also yell quite a bit, calling sheep by all sorts of name, "Move, you stupid beast!" "Darn you, you silly heathen!," etc.

We have idealized the shepherding profession

We've made it a metaphor for ordained clergy ministry. We call an ordained minister a "Pastor," which is another way to say a

“Shepherd.” We call our Bishops, the “Shepherds” of our church. We even give them a “Staff” similar to the ones some Shepherds use to hook the head of the animal and bring them back to safer ground.

Because of these positive associations with Jesus, we have made shepherding into a metaphor for leadership. This of course relates back to the Old Testaments and passages like Jeremiah 23:1-2; “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.

Ezekiel 34; “Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? 3 You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep... I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.”

Numbers 27:16-17.” ‘Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd.’

If we want the positive associations between shepherding and Christian leadership, we must be willing to accept the responsibilities associated with shepherding at the time of Jesus.

No businessman in a suit, cellphone on the right hand, and a tablet on the left, loaded with sophisticated algorithms that give him the exact number and GPS coordinates of the sheep.

No ivory tower shepherds who spend all their time talking about pension funds, legal liability, and building campaigns.

No leaders disconnected from their sheep, but leaders able and willing to do the hard work required of shepherding, including the messy, dirty, dangerous, and physically exhausting parts of the Job.

The Pharisees and “those who came before me” are the obvious targets of this sermon. In fact, John 9: 35-41 tells us of the controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees. They are the wrong type of Shepherd. The passage today builds a contrast between the right and wrong type of leadership.

The inept leader does not spend the necessary time building relationships with the sheep, but cuts corners entering not through the gate. It takes time to familiarize the sheep to his whistle, to his voice, to his dogs. This is patient time spent among the sheep. Long days and long hours, but without this time together, the sheep will not follow.

The good and responsible shepherd protects the sheep above all else. He fights predators, he guards the sheep at night, he looks for them until he finds them, he walks them to green pastures, etc.

The Pharisee leaves the lost sheep in its lostness and does nothing to find it. In fact, they worry more about respecting the Sabbath than caring for the sheep. In Chapter 9, they violently oppose a man cured from blindness on the Sabbath, questioning him several times, his parents, and then expelling him from the synagogue.

There is no cost of ownership for the Pharisees. They see themselves not as leaders and servants of the people, but as protectors of the known orthodoxy of the day. The right way of thinking is more important to them than protecting those given into their care. They benefit from the sheep and get fat on the sheep, but they do not care for the sheep.

Are we really the Shepherds? Are we really Sheep? I don't think this passage is about us as shepherds and people being sheep. I believe that at best, we are the under-shepherds, all of us, and we all take care of each other. Even Bishops are under-shepherds. I believe Jesus of Nazareth is the only Shepherd. There is a lot of language in this passage about hearing and not hearing. The sheep hear and recognize the shepherds voice, but not the voice of those who are not the shepherds. There are a lot of loud voices in the church today, yelling, “Follow me! Hear me! I am your shepherd! Look at my wonderful marketing campaigns! Look at my billboards!” But only one voice is to be trusted, and that is the voice of the Shepherd. Our Job is to listen to his voice and to teach others to recognize his calls and his voice. We are his, and he is willing to die for us. May he continue to bless us. Amen!.

