

The Working Flock
Psalm 23 & John 10: 22-30
Sermon by Jan Edmiston
Fairlington Presbyterian Church
Easter 4 – April 29, 2007

I preach to you this morning, sheep to sheep - one sheep to another.

Yes, I'm the pastor of this church, and that word -- "pastor" -- comes from the word "pasture"¹ where the sheep spend their days.

It's also true that this particular congregation is divided into "Shepherding Groups" -- which means that if you are a member, you have "Shepherds" -- an elder who is "your Elder" and a deacon who is "your Deacon" -- your "Shepherds."

But the truth of the matter is that we are all sheep and only God is the real shepherd. Jesus called himself "The Good Shepherd."² And of course, the gospel of John reminds us "The Father and Jesus are one."

We sometimes forget that church leaders are only sheep -- just like everybody else, but we trust that our spiritual leaders have heard and recognized a Voice that makes it clearer which direction we must go.

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Two weeks ago, this congregation celebrated its 60th anniversary. We were founded in 1947, and that's how we phrase our beginnings -- by the year we were "founded." Sixty years is indeed something to celebrate, but consider that the first church in Jamestown, Virginia celebrates its 400th anniversary this year.³

If we were to study colonial church history in this country, we'd find that the first churches in this country did not identify their beginnings by the year they were "founded." The history of The Church of Christ at Dartmouth College, for example, states that the church "was gathered in 1771."⁴ The Old First Church in Bennington, Vermont "was gathered in 1762."⁵ Old First Church in Springfield, Massachusetts "was gathered in 1637."⁶

¹ "Pastor" means "shepherd" in that "*pas*" is the base of the Latin "*pascere*" (to put out to pasture or feed) and "*tor*" is a common Latin personal suffix as in "janitor," "dictator," "orator," etc.

² John 10:11.

³ <http://www.apva.org/tour/chtour.html>

⁴ <http://www.ccdc-ucc.org/aboutus.html>

⁵ <http://www.revolutionaryday.com/usroute7/bennington/default.htm>

⁶ <http://www.revolutionaryday.com/usroute20/springfield/default.htm>

Being “gathered” is not the same as being “founded.” Being “gathered” recognizes that someone else – a shepherd? – has gathered us. It involves coming together into the flock. These first congregations considered themselves to be sheep, probably because of the passages read this morning.

There is great comfort in being gathered into a community, protected by a strong shepherd who keeps us safe from wolves.

Maybe this is why we love the 23rd Psalm so much: these words offer such comfort to us sheep in a world still filled with wolves. In the midst of our stresses and burdens and heartache and fears and frustrations, we hear of a shepherd who promises to make everything okay:

- He makes us rest – and rest in a beautiful place - in green pastures
- He leads us beside still waters
- He restores our souls – who doesn’t need this?
- He leads us in paths of righteousness
- He comforts us
- He prepares a table for us
- He anoints us with oil – he makes us special, he makes us holy
- He is good and merciful

In a world still teeming with wolves, these are soothing words. When worry make us toss and turn at night, when the waters of life are so rough we feel like we could be drown, when our souls are parched and our enemies might be at table with us but it’s because they want to eat us alive – we cling to these words. These words speak of One who can save us from all that.

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Some of us have gathered for worship regularly on Sunday mornings for most of our lives. It’s what we do. It’s what we’ve always done.

But there are also many who either left the church or were never a part of “the flock” who have come together with this congregation because *Something Has Happened* that required spiritual assistance.

I once met a woman who was prompted to return to church after her four year old niece drowned in the family pool and the woman could not live with this reality. She was desperate for restoration.

I remember another woman who found herself here on a Thursday night after boyfriend left her – shattered. I remember a neighbor who came through our doors after his wife died and he was so lonely, he could not bear it any longer.

God uses our pain in this way, gathering us together to support each other, to be like Christ for each other. We come together to be loved and restored.

But the truth of the matter is this: if being a sheep only goes so far as lying in green pastures and resting beside still waters, then we've missed the point. It's not just about gathering together and having The Good Shepherd carry us around the field on his shoulders, although it might start like that.

Paul Borden -- who spends his life training church leaders⁷ believes that we need to alter our understanding of the congregation as sheep. We seem to be satisfied with our role as sheep who merely stretch out on those green pastures and sip from those still waters. And sometimes that's about all we want to do. We want to be taken care of. But once we stop feeling cared for, we slip out of the flock to do our own thing . . . at least until the next time we need God's help.

What we've forgotten is that THE SHEEP WORK FOR THE SHEPHERD. Think about it.

The purpose of the sheep is **to serve the shepherd**: to provide wool, maybe even to give up its life to feed the Shepherd!⁸ And remember in the church -- the pastor is not the shepherd. The church officers are not the shepherds. Jesus is the one and only Good Shepherd.

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The average sheep produces from 6 to 16 pounds of wool every year⁹ which would make more sweaters than any shepherd or any single person would ever need.¹⁰ (Nobody needs that many sweaters.)

And so the purpose of sheep -- it seems -- is to serve the shepherd but we also have the resources to serve others in the shepherd's name. . . which brings me to the purpose of this flock.

⁷ Paul Borden is executive minister with the American Baptist Churches of the West. See: <http://www.growinghealthychurches.org/art/index.shtml>

⁸ Borden further states that the role of pastors has changed too: "Seminaries have historically trained pastors to function as chaplains, responsible for preaching, counseling, and pastoral care. . . If the church is going to be focusing outward, touching an un-churched culture, then the pastor has to take on a different role: the role of leader." **I hope everyone reading this sermon will also read this article:** <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/8752.htm>

⁹ <http://ag.missouristate.edu/showme/showmew.pdf>;

http://www.sheepusa.org/index.phtml?page=site/text&nav_id=06b30b9c925056e3635d644c8ae9a29b

¹⁰ 1 pound of wool = 20 miles of wool = 35200 yards of wool. It takes about 4 skeins of wool (about 400 yards of wool) to knit one sweater.

We exist not merely to comfort ourselves and each other within the flock. Yes, we deserve to be comforted, and we want to care for our fellow sheep right here with us. But **we exist to serve those outside the flock** in the name of The Good Shepherd. If we know the shepherd and hear his voice, we understand this.

Next month we will be focusing on mission – and not just mission in the traditional sense where we take out our checkbooks and write a check and send it off for someone else to do the heavy lifting. It’s good to share our money but there is more to mission than that. **We are called to be missional** – serving people outside this flock – which means that we are to become one with the people we serve.

Remember: all of us are sheep. Yes, we want to care for each other in the church, in this “flock” – but we fail miserably if the only ones we serve are each other.

The Gospel of John reminds us that God loves the whole world ¹¹ and we, who already know the Shepherd’s voice, are called to teach others what that voice sounds like.

Jesus’ voice is the One that reminds us what our life’s purpose really is. Remember in the Lord’s Prayer – a prayer we pray every Sunday – when Jesus taught us to pray: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?

Jesus promises us eternal life. But following this Shepherd is not just about the afterlife. We are called to follow Jesus, to do what Jesus did, to advance God’s will on earth just as we believe it’s done in heaven.

This week – on Tuesday night – we have the privilege to get together with Martha Sommers – a doctor who followed God’s voice to Malawi in Africa – a nation where 25 percent of the population is HIV positive and 25 percent of all children die before their fifth birthday.¹²

This is a person who could have had a very comfortable life as a physician here in the United States. There are many voices that surely spoke to her about the benefits of staying in this country to live out a very satisfying, prosperous life close to home.

But she heard a different voice. It was a voice that called her to work in a faraway field. Dr. Sommers wrote last month:

*We can do very little for many of these patients, so I sometimes feel I am going from one tragedy to another. There is so much suffering, with tender beauty breaking through the sadness.*¹³

¹¹ John 3:16

¹² <http://www.pcusa.org/missionconnections/profiles/sommersm.htm>

¹³ From a March 2007 letter from Martha Sommers. See:

http://www.pcusa.org/missionconnections/letters/sommersm/sommersm_0702.htm

And yet, she shares the news that the average census on the children's ward in her Hospital has decreased from its usual 50-60 patients last year to a recent census of 15-30. She and others have worked hard to restore souls in the name of Jesus Christ. They try to provide a cool, safe place where God's precious sheep can find rest. They try to protect God's little lambs from malaria with mosquito nets, from hunger with fertilizer for farmers.

I encourage everybody to come hear Martha Sommers on Tuesday night, but consider yourself warned: because she has heard God's Voice and followed that Voice, she has been given a voice that might direct us. God might speak through Martha to move us to follow in a new way.

The Shepherd often speaks through his sheep – especially the ones who follow him closely. And if we listen, we will realize that we can no longer merely languish beside still waters. Sometimes God moves us to a new field.

This is just one of two hospitals we have supported through the years in this church. The hospital in Malawi where Martha Sommers serves is called Embangweni Hospital. The other hospital we have long supported is in the Congo and it's called – interestingly enough – Good Shepherd Hospital.¹⁴

Mike and Nancy Hanniger work there as an obstetrician/gynecologist and nurse midwife.¹⁵ Again, God's voice led them to serve in a place where there were countless souls in need of restoration. Because of the work of our denomination and this congregation, there is not only a general hospital in that region, but there is also a medical school, a dental school, schools of nursing and laboratory technology, and over a dozen nutrition centers. Mike and Nancy have helped make this happen. But in the last year, Mike Hanniger was, himself, treated for cancer. And the Hannigers discovered something amazing: the sheep they went to serve, also served them as Mike was treated for cancer.

Here is one of the amazing things about following Jesus' Voice. We find that while we in the flock appear to be different, we are all – actually – just sheep. Sometimes we take great pride in being the ones who can lord our good deeds over someone else. But we have only one LORD. We are all just sheep.

In a different time in this country, the average person might have known the difference between a Columbia lamb from Texas and a Coopworth lamb from West Virginia. Today we just know there are white sheep and black sheep, and some have long stringy hair and some are rotund and wooly.

¹⁴ See pictures and read more about Good Shepherd Hospital here:
<http://www.pcusa.org/health/international/profiles/christian-med-kasai-congo.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.pcusa.org/missionconnections/profiles/haninger.htm>

But whether we understand sheep or not – the truth is that they serve the same purpose, and sheep are more alike than not. One kind of sheep is not really better than another, except in terms of how well they serve the one who owns them.

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This past week, new students were being interviewed for the best outreach of this particular congregation – Computer CORE. If you are new or haven't heard, this church established a project about six years ago to train underemployed adults computer skills. Most of them are immigrants. Most of "them" don't look like most of "us." But they have found more than restoration in this project. It has changed their lives. And some have heard the Shepherd's Voice.

As I said, last week they were interviewing potential students for their next classes, and I saw a woman who looked like the kind of person who takes Computer CORE classes: young, foreign-born. Her skin was dark and her accent was – I think – African. She was standing at the bottom of the stairs in the hallway, and I assumed she was here because she had been called to sign up to be helped by this congregation.

"May I help you?" I asked thinking she needed directions to a certain classroom. And she said, No – she was here to help other people who were on their way to the interviews upstairs. *She* was standing there to guide people in the right direction. But she herself had once been a Computer CORE student.

And this is the great thing: she had once been lead into a place that could change her life. And she was not satisfied to be restored herself. She responded by guiding other people to help *them* find restoration.

And after explaining this to me, she said, "May I help *you*?"

What I could have said was this: "I'm the pastor of this church! Surely you can't help *me*! I'm here to help *you*!" But once again – the truth is that we are all actually just sheep. All of us are called to serve the same Master, the same LORD. We maybe didn't look alike, but that stranger and I were both sheep.

Jesus said that we are called to go out and include everybody in this flock¹⁶, to search for the lost sheep who has wandered off.¹⁷ And if we really know him, we will hear his voice and follow.

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We have a goal in the coming month of May that 100 souls would be missional sometime in the next four weeks. Yes, we are going to ask you to write checks to support

¹⁶ Matthew 28: 16-20

¹⁷ Luke 15:3-7

mission. Yes, we will continue to invite you to toss your spare change into those Joyful Noise buckets the children carry for mission.

But we want you to do one thing more: do something hands on. It could be as simple as donating things for the May 19th yard sale which will benefit the work trip to Mississippi. It might be to sign up to go to Mississippi in June. It might be to sign up to go to Haiti in October. You'll be hearing about all these possibilities this month.

But most of all, we want you to be quiet enough to hear the Shepherd's Voice. We want you to consider what God is calling you to do. Where is God leading?

Yes, God leads us beside still waters. But God also calls us to lead others to still waters too.

Yes, we are all sheep. But we are not sheep alone. God gathers us together to expand the flock, so that *everyone* might dwell in the house of the LORD forever.