

“Sheep, Shepherds, and Sheepdogs”

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April 30, 2006
Text: John 10:11-18

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Archibald Spooner was an Anglican priest and head of New College, Oxford. He is less famous for what he did, however, than for how he did it. His mind rushing faster than his tongue, Spooner would frequently reverse the initial letters or syllables of two or more words. He's the one who gave us, in his sermons and speeches, such memorable lines as “A blushing crow,” for “A crushing blow,” or “I have a half-warmed fish in my mind,” for “I have a half-formed wish in my mind.” These slips of the tongue became known as spoonerisms.

You've probably heard the spoonerism versions of some familiar stories – Loldi Gocks and the Be Thares, The Pea Little Thrigs, and Rindercella. Archie Campbell used to talk about Rindercella, her sisty uglers and her stegly upmother. Have you ever offered someone a cough of cuppee? Do you remember hearing about President Herbert Hoover introduced as Hoobert Heaver? I remember the newscast in which the late Peter Jennings reported on an earthquack strake. One of my all time favorite spoonerisms comes from Spooner himself, who was preaching about the Lord being a Loving Shepherd, but it came out “The Lord is a Shoving Leopard.” The Shoving Leopard – the Loving Shepherd – isn't that the image we get from the 23rd Psalm, and Jesus as the good shepherd from the gospel of John.

A pastor joined a local service club where some of his congregation were also members. Assigned the task of making name tags for the group, the members of his congregation decided to play a practical joke on the pastor, and labeled his tag “Hog Caller.” When the pastor saw his name tag, he laughed. “They usually call me the Shepherd of the Sheep,” he quipped, “but I suppose our members know themselves better than I do.”

Given a choice between being hogs and sheep – what do you think? Both scriptures for today involve shepherd and sheep images. Images of the shepherd are wonderful and beautiful images. But the idea of sheep – of us being sheep – is a little more troublesome. I admit I was raised a city kid – my experience with sheep is limited. My contact with sheep has been from a distance in a pasture, or up close at a petting zoo. I've only eaten lamb a few times and wool is too scratchy for me to wear.

Did you know there is some recent research which seems to indicate that sheep are smarter than we may have thought? A study in Britain found that sheep are capable of remembering faces of other sheep. To me all sheep look the same, but apparently sheep can tell each other apart. Somehow this test was able to determine that a sheep can visually recognize as many as 50 sheep faces even if they haven't seen them for two years. I'm not making this stuff up! I have this picture in my mind of a sheep jammed into a recliner and sitting in front of a video screen saying, “I know him, and him, . . .”

Also, sheep can learn to go through a maze of open and closed fences. Would you believe you can click on a website and see a sheep negotiate a maze. I actually did that – it's not the most exciting video I've ever watched, but it does show the sheep making choices and figuring out which way to turn. The BBC reported that sheep on the Yorkshire moors have taught themselves to roll eight feet across hoof-proof metal cattle grids in order to raid villagers' gardens. One West Yorkshire resident said, “The sheep lie down on their side, or sometimes their back, and just roll over and over the grids until they are clear.” A national farmers union spokesperson said, “We've never seen anything like it. A National Sheep Association official said that it just proves that “sheep are quite intelligent creatures and have more brainpower than people are willing to give them credit for.”

However, not everyone is convinced that sheep are that bright. Last July in the Turkish village of Gevas, 450 sheep followed each other in jumping to their deaths. One-third of a flock of 1500 sheep incomprehensively tried to jump a 50 foot ravine. Naturally, their long-jump skills were not up to the leap, and one after another, they plunged to their deaths into the chasm below. According to the news report, stunned shepherds were left as helpless onlookers, unable to prevent their animals' nonsensical plunge of death. It was a financial calamity for the village, which lost \$100,000 in sheep. One villager, Mr. Ozalan, said, “This is a catastrophe. I am financially ruined, I always thought sheep had some grey matters between their ears. I have lost all of my respect for sheep.” The report ended by saying that Mr. Ozalan was switching to chicken farming.

Maybe sheep are more intelligent than we care to admit. But they don't appear to be too bright. They

get clipped and eaten and they're reputed to be lacking in initiative – and they're likely to fall over cliffs or entangle themselves in brush. I called our veterinarian, Deb Mangelsdorf, who happens to be a high school classmate of mine. Deb said, "Sheep are some of God's dumbest creatures. That's why they need a good shepherd."

Maybe some of us would rather not be compared to sheep, especially if their intelligence is in question. So if we have problems with seeing ourselves as dumb sheep, then maybe we can take comfort and identify with the shepherd – especially those of us who are church leaders – after all, don't we lead the flock? Don't our pastors function as shepherds? We've been talking in elders meetings about the role of an elder and one of those roles is as shepherd. Our newly formed care cluster program is another name for a shepherding program.

But our reading from John's gospel makes it clear that there can really be only one shepherd of the flock – and that shepherd is Jesus Christ. The qualifications for being a shepherd are straight-forward. You must be crucified, die, and rise again in three days. That is what it takes to be the shepherd of God's flock. There is only one qualified candidate to serve as the Good Shepherd – and I ain't it and neither are you. So let's remember that we aren't the Good Shepherd – Christ is. None of us are the head of the church – Christ is. It isn't Neil's church. None of us are capable of being the Good Shepherd, only Christ can assume that privilege.

So if we don't really care to see ourselves as passive sheep, and if we can't claim for ourselves the role of shepherd, what's left, especially for those of us who are leaders? Leaders in the flock – and I place all of us in that category – are called to claim the status of sheepdogs. Now think about that with me for a moment. The Great Sheepdog is one that knows that Shepherd's will and senses the Shepherds's commands. The sheepdog has a relationship with and knows and listens to and obeys the voice of the Shepherd. Skilled sheepdogs respond to a symphony of different whistles, a chorus of various commands, and work with the flock according to the Shepherd's orders. The sheepdog's primary goal is to keep the sheep always moving toward the Shepherd, eventually moving them into the safety of the Shepherd's fold. Just as the really skilled sheepdog will use a variety of techniques to keep the sheep moving, we as obedient leaders may at times even need to nip at the heels of a slow-moving heart or stubbornly wrong-headed idea in order to re-direct attention toward the one who must really be in charge – Jesus Christ.

Most of you know we have an Old English sheepdog named Bentley. He's the third sheepdog we've had over the past twenty years. I've noticed several qualities in him worth emulating as pastor/leader/Christian. (1) Old English sheepdogs are enthusiastic. Bentley is always glad to see me. Lord Byron said, "The dog – in life the firmest friend, the first to welcome, first to defend." Bentley always seems ready to go and do – to try something new. I've never found Bentley hesitate and say, "Uh, Neil, we've never done it that way before." (2) Bentley is extremely loyal – he remains by our side, he wants to protect us. I'm certain he probably thinks the best of us. You know, I can't remember the last time Bentley gossiped about us to the other dogs. (3) Sheepdogs, like all dogs, are very loving and forgiving.

Gary Kowalski says this about dogs which I believe is very instructive for those of us who are called to be herders of the flock.

Everyone needs a spiritual guide: a minister, a rabbi, counselor, wise friend. My own wise friend is my dog. He has deep knowledge to impart. He makes friends easily and doesn't hold a grudge. He enjoys simple pleasures and takes each day as it comes. . . . Best of all, he befriends me with an unconditional love that human beings would do well to imitate.

And Doris Day observed, "I have found that when you are deeply troubled, there are things you get from the silent devoted companionship of a dog that you can get from no other source."

Christian friends, we are surrounded by sheep – some that are smart and clever; some that are dumb and will follow anything or anyone to anywhere, even if it leads to self destruction. And there are wolves out there. Wolves that come right at us – like cancer, like getting laid off from work, like grief. And there are wolves that sneak up on us dressed in sheep's clothing – only to go for the throat. A few drinks now and then that end up in alcoholism; little resentments which harden into a grudge that destroys a relationship; innocent gossip and negativity which can divide the flock and suck the life out of the church's mission and witness.

As sheepdogs, let us help the sheep around us stay away from the wolves that can be avoided. Let us help them confront with strength and courage those wolves they must face. And let us help the sheep move toward the Shepherd. May we do so with enthusiasm, with loyalty. Let us make friends easily and not hold grudges. Let us enjoy the simple pleasures and take each day as it comes. Let us offer to others devoted companionship. Let us keep our eyes and ears attuned to Jesus Christ – the one and only Good Shepherd – the Good Shepherd who is, as the psalmist notes, a loving shepherd. Let us respond to God's call to be shoving leapdogs – loving sheepdogs – in God's service. Amen.

(Thanks to Leonard Sweet for the spoonerism idea.)