

Jesus the Good Shepherd
John 10:1-21

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I begin today's sermon with a bit of show and tell: this is wool from sheep at Catherine Foote's farm on Whidbey Island. Many of you know that I spend time up there on occasion, and some of you visited that place last year for Lamb Day. About a month ago I went up for sheep shearing day, and I brought home some of the dirtiest wool, washed it many times, and here it is. Feel it, smell it, pass it around. So when I read these passages where Jesus is talking about sheep and shepherds, very specific images come to my mind. I'm thinking of real sheep who produce real wool, and I want to tell you about some of them.

Silver lived to be 14 years old—ancient by sheep standards. She was one of the few sheep that Catherine had given a name, because she was one of the first sheep Catherine ever bought, and she taught Catherine how to be a good shepherd. When Silver had a difficult time giving birth and couldn't care for her lamb, Catherine learned how to bottle-feed a lamb. He has a name, too—Junior—and he is one of the friendliest sheep on the farm, because he learned as a lamb that humans would take care of him.

In her old age, Silver became unsteady on her feet. Some of us know how that goes. Toward the end, she had a few falls. Once when I was the hired hand tending the sheep, I put their hay out in the feeder, filled their water troughs, led the sheep from the barn to the pasture, and left the farm for the day. Late in the afternoon I returned, and as I walked up the long driveway, I looked out at the pasture and automatically began counting sheep. One, two, three, ... eighteen. Where was the nineteenth sheep? Perhaps I miscounted. One, two, three, ... eighteen. And all these

sheep looked hale and healthy, so I knew Silver was the one missing: she looked grizzled and gaunt.

I put on my boots and headed out to the field. Sure enough, there she was, lying on her side by the feeder. She had fallen and couldn't get up. And apparently she had fallen in the morning, because the feeder was still full. None of the other sheep had eaten their breakfast unless she could join them.

What do *I* know about helping an elderly sheep get on her feet? I'm just the hired hand. But in the back of my mind came the memory of a James Herriot story where the country vet rolls a fallen sheep onto its chest, and from there it could get to its feet. Nothing to lose. I slid my hands under Silver's bony ribcage and gently pushed. She rolled. In fact, she kept on rolling and went clear onto her other side. I came around Silver's other side and tried again. This time she rolled onto her chest. She sat there for a moment. And then she jerked and stumbled to her feet, tottered over to the feeder, and started to eat.

The other sheep had all been watching this from a safe distance. Only when they saw her eating did they gather around the feeder and eat, too. When she was down on the ground, they knew something was wrong. But now she was up again.

A few key points about this scripture passage from John.

The shepherd calls the sheep by name. When you name a sheep, you are much less likely to eat it for dinner. Silver died of old age, cared for to the end, and she is buried on the farm. Regardless of whether Catherine has named her sheep, God knows the name of every sheep in the flock. God knows our names, the names that resonate deep in our souls. God calls us by name, to lead us. Are we listening for our good shepherd?

When Jesus says, "I am the gate," he is not the gatekeeper, shutting out those who would like to graze in green pastures, who would like to find

their way to God. Rather, he invites all who wish to know God to come through the gate.

Jesus says, “I am the gate,” and then he says, “I am the good shepherd.” You can kind of understand why Jesus’ disciples were often confused by his metaphors. Pick one and stick with it, can’t you? At the end of this reading, some of his listeners say, “He has a demon,” which is like us nowadays saying, “That guy’s on drugs. I have no idea what he’s saying.” But others say, “No, he’s not on drugs. He’s making sense; I’m just not sure I fully understand it.”

Some see this passage as suggesting that Jesus is the only way to God. Unless you come through the gate that is Jesus, unless you follow the good shepherd who is Jesus, you will not find the path to God. Let me point out that Jesus says he has other sheep as well, and that we are all meant to be one flock. What would the world look like if we truly understood that we are all one flock? That when one sheep falls down, as Silver did, we are all impacted?

- Imagine if our politicians created a health care plan with the understanding that when one of us is sick, we all suffer?
- Imagine if our immigration enforcers understood that when one family is split up and parents are deported, we are all grieving?
- Imagine if we understood that God is not a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew, that God is God and we all find our path to God, by whatever name we call it?
- Imagine if we understood that when the brown-skinned children are denied a good education, our whole flock is more vulnerable?
- Imagine if we understood that our carbon emissions over here impact people over there?
- Many in this flock called Prospect understand that when some are hungry, there are things we can do to find them green pasture.
- When some are homeless, there are things we can do to provide shelter and support, as we will with Mary’s Place families in late July and as some of you do as individuals.

Today we baptized Josephine Daley and welcomed her into the flock. From now on she can say—when she learns the words—that she is a Christian. And we pledged to walk with her and her family on the journey to understanding what it means to be Christian, to be one who follows Jesus, the good shepherd. Because this is not an exclusive club, where everyone else is condemned to burn in hell. This is a flock that is following our good shepherd, no matter the cost.

For Jesus, the cost was his life, which he did indeed lay down for his flock. And the story didn't end there. When we follow Jesus, we may be invited to lay down some of our personal privileges for the benefit of the greater flock. So when we say we follow Jesus, it doesn't mean we get to go into some special pasture with extra green grass and no one else can come. It means we are invited to follow his example, to reach out across boundaries, to serve the greater good of the whole flock instead of just serving ourselves. It means we can try to be good *shepherds*, too, taking care of each other, learning how to help each other get back on our feet when we fall.

Jesus says the thieves and bandits and wolves try to come in and wreak havoc. These are the temptations and distractions that keep us from committing fully to following the good shepherd. We have all encountered those distractions. I see it in sheep when I'm trying to get them back in the barn at the end of a summer's day, when sunlight lingers on the upper meadow. One sheep toward the front of the flock turns her head away from the barn, pauses, takes a step out of line. Maybe she can find a little more green pasture on her own before darkness descends. She's not thinking about coyotes. A few other sheep decide to go with her, and suddenly the shepherd has more work on her hands to guide the sheep back into the barn, where they will be safe from predators for the night.

Consider how Jesus the good shepherd calls you by name. Consider what it means to follow fully in the path of Jesus. Consider what it

means to live for the good of the flock. And what keeps us from committing to that good shepherd all the way.

Silver has been gone for some time now. I was up at the farm this weekend, and there are three new lambs bounding and baah-ing around the pasture. As we welcome our own little lamb Josephine and pledge to walk with her, let us also remember those who made similar pledges when we were baptized. All of us are part of the flock, and like a flock, we understand that the faith journey happens well when there is community to support you. All of us are called by name, loved fully and completely by a God who invites us to come.

So come to the green pasture. Feast on the good grass. Restore your soul by the still waters. The good shepherd leads the way for us all. Amen.