

FELC 88th ANNIVERSARY OBSERVANCE (July 17, 1936)
9th Sunday after Pentecost
July 21, 2024
First English, Austin
Text: John 10:22-30

NOT JUST SHEEP, BUT SHEPHERDS

This one snuck in on me through the back door. Bryan emailed me July 1 and suggested that for today we use the assigned readings for the Anniversary of a Congregation, and indicated what those readings were. Without paying any attention to the readings I thought, "Well, that seems appropriate," and responded to Bryan, "Sounds good, let's do it."

Only a couple days later, when I did pay attention to the readings did I realize that the Gospel reading was from the 10th Chapter of John, the "sheep" chapter, or as it's usually known the "Good Shepherd" chapter, in which Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd and those who follow him and for whom he cares and leads as sheep.

That shepherd/sheep imagery reflects the pastoral, nomadic society of the early Israelite people when they literally did have flocks of sheep and goats and moved from place to place, shepherding them as they went. The imagery carried over to later Israel's more settled, non-nomadic, life. Israel's leaders were it's shepherds caring for and leading the people who were the nation's sheep.

So in using shepherd and sheep language Jesus was drawing on his heritage. And though we're not a nomadic or primarily agrarian society today, and though we may not be personally familiar with sheep or shepherds, still we know and grasp the metaphor. And it continues to hold meaning for us.

Now I'll grant you that this shepherd/sheep imagery is kinda homey, and it's easy to get sentimental about it, painting pastoral scenes in our minds if not on canvas. But

people who romanticize the shepherd/sheep image have probably not spent a lot of time with sheep.

On the farm where I grew up in South Dakota we didn't raise sheep, but I had all the contact with them that I wanted, and more, in high school as part of a Future Farmers of America livestock judging team—cattle, hogs, and sheep. I don't like sheep.

It's not that they're not very intelligent—though they're not. It's not that they're easily led—though they are. It's not that they often have a bad disposition—which contrary to our image of cute little lambs, many sheep do.

No, my biggest problem with sheep is that they stink, especially if they're wet—and if you spend enough time around them, and in contact with them (which you do when judging them), you end up smelling like them.

I don't want to be a sheep. And I'd prefer not to be compared to one. Yet the 10th chapter of John's gospel is full of that imagery. But wait! There's hope!

In a Gary Larson "Far Side" cartoon from a number of years ago (which still lives on the bulletin board in my home office), one lone sheep is standing erect on hind legs, visible above the surrounding flock. Its front legs are raised, and the sheep is proclaiming to the totally disinterested flock around it: "Wait! Wait! Listen to me... We don't have to be just sheep!"

That sheep in Gary Larson's "Far Side" cartoon got it right--"We don't have to be just sheep!" You see, we sheep can also be shepherds.

I like the ELW a lot, but anytime we change worship books there are some things that get lost. And in the ELW one of the things that got lost was the Lutheran Book of

Worship's prayer of the day for Fourth Sunday of Easter,
Lectionary Cycle C.

It says: "God of all power, you called from death our
Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep. Send us as
shepherds to rescue the lost, to heal the injured, and to
feed one another with knowledge and understanding;..."

We who are sheep can also be, and in fact are called to
be, shepherds! Which, of course, entails some
responsibility--as that LBW Prayer makes clear. Shepherds
are faithful, shepherds lead, shepherds provide, shepherds
protect, shepherds guide, shepherds help the sick and
injured, shepherds search for the lost, and shepherds
sometimes lose sleep while watching over the sheep. Sounds
like a job description for both clergy and laity involved
in the life and ministry of a congregation, doesn't it?

For 88 years the saints of God at First English have been not just sheep, following the Good Shepherd, but have also been shepherds—leading, loving, caring for, serving each other, this community, the wider church, and the world. For in following the Good Shepherd, walking in the footsteps of Jesus and striving for the mind and heart of Christ to live within us, we become shepherds to others.

Truth to be told, sometimes we saints of God are sheep in the worst sense of the image (stinky, hard-headed, easily led, obstinate, not smart). And so we constantly look to Jesus the Good Shepherd who leads, guides, and sustains us throughout life, at all of the various stages and passages of life--birth, growing up, maturing, perhaps marrying, perhaps having children, in sickness and in health, good times and bad, in life and in death.

We are sheep. And Jesus is the Good Shepherd who never deserts us, who seeks us out when we stray, who carries us on strong loving shoulders when we falter, and who travels with us wherever the road may take us—sometimes leading us, sometimes beside us, sometimes behind us prodding us forward (occasionally kicking us in the butt).

But also, as that LBW Prayer reminds us, Jesus, the Good Shepherd sends us to be shepherds to other sheep. Sheep, become shepherds. Shepherds who become the loving and caring hand of the Good Shepherd as we touch the lives of others in all of life's circumstances, as we comfort and strengthen, as we protect and console, as we share the good news about the Good Shepherd--shepherds to each other, to children and parents and other family members; shepherds to friends, to co-workers, to others within our own communities of faith and beyond; whether our ministry is as

one of those our church calls "rostered" or as one of the laity, which is most of us.

The saints of First English Lutheran Church have been doing our sheep/shepherd thing for 88 years and are still doing it today, and will be doing it tomorrow and into the future: striving as sheep to follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd but also serving as shepherds to others.

Knowing all the while that as we live out our shepherd role, Jesus the Good Shepherd is present with us as sheep/shepherds to guide and provide, to support and sustain, to bring rest in green pastures, to lead beside still waters, to restore our sometimes troubled spirits, to help banish fears and anxieties, to provide a bountiful table of goodness and love; as we do the same for each other.

In all of this, it turns out, we are in the very best of company. For, lest we forget, the One who is our Good

Shepherd also became a sheep in the form of the sacrificial Lamb who died on the cross for us. #

I still don't particularly like being compared to a sheep. But knowing that our Good Shepherd was also a sheep is important. And knowing that we don't have to be just sheep, that we are also called to be shepherds--that's important too.

But first and foremost is the good news that the One who is our Good Shepherd, who became our sacrificial Lamb, leads us and guides us as sheep and as we seek to be shepherds to others.

May God's blessing be upon, and may God's Spirit go with the saints of First English as we seek to live out our calling to be sheep and shepherds for this 89th year and beyond.

AMEN.

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