

Title: The Love and Care the Good Shepherd Provides

Our Lord's parabolic discourse in our Gospel today is his reply to the conduct of the Pharisees in the previous chapter, who excommunicated an adoring disciple who had passed out of lifelong blindness with its inherent darkness into marvelous light. By refusing to acknowledge the power and glory of God in what Jesus did by giving the blind man sight, they show not only their own spiritual blindness but also their inability to lead God's people.

As Jesus confronts this behavior, he begins his discourse with the words, "Very truly," to emphasize the truth and importance of what he is about to say. Then, figuratively, he states, "***he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.***"¹ The similes in this dialogue come from the Psalms and various Old Testament prophets, who compare humans to sheep who need protection from thieves, robbers, and wolfs in sheep's clothing.

In the Episcopal Church's website on *Sermons That Work*, Michael Toy explains, "Like sheep, humans can be led astray. Humans like to follow others."² And like sheep, humans can also be unaware of the danger they are in. He says that "These are not inherently bad qualities. They are human qualities."³ As social creatures, we are influenced by what others do and think.

¹ John 10:1-2

² Sermons that Work, Michael Toy, "A Bunch of Sheep" Easter 4, April 30, 2023

³ Ibid.

Yet despite our carelessness and duplicity, the Good Shepherd remains steadfast in his love and doesn't give up, and brings his beloved into a life they have always wanted—a life that is full and abundant.

When I first started my journey as a Christian, I soon realized that spiritual discernment was not something that came naturally or easily. I ran into people who were zealous, but the fruit of their ministries led to confusion and all manner of spiritual error and bondage. I remember praying something similar to our opening collect prayer today. But using my own words, I said, “Lord, I don’t know who is right and who is wrong. Good Shepherd of my soul, lead me, guide me, and show me the truth. Since I don’t know what I am doing when it comes to spiritual things, take that shepherd’s staff of yours and pull me into the place where I need to be.”

Then as I began to find my way toward a place that was more straight and narrow, I encountered one sinful and foolish tendency after another. If we don’t end up in a ditch on one side of the road, we end up in it on the other. And even if we get on the straight and narrow, there is a tendency to judge those who are not traveling on the road with us. Michael Toy commented on this when he stated, “God is the gate, not us.”⁴ But unfortunately, there is a human impulse to judge and gatekeep who is in and who is out of our communities. But that is not the role of the sheep. Jesus is clear when he says, “*I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*”⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ John 10:7

The door of the fold admits the sheep to Divine pasture; they who accept Christ's mediation find at their disposal all the provision of God's spiritual bounty. Jesus declared, "*I am the Good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*"⁶ This means that the sheep are so prized and treasured by their Shepherd that He will do anything and everything for their best interests. So Jesus declares in our Gospel today, "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*"⁷ Therefore, we can say with the hymn writer: "*The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever.*"

This hymn, written by Henry Williams Baker, depicts God's constant care and provision despite the perverse and waywardness of sheep. It is because sheep have no discernment, even about such mundane things as what they should eat; they need a watchful shepherd to lead them away from things that might make them sick.

At my last church, one of the parishioners, who grew up on a farm with sheep, shared that if one got scared and jumped the fence, the others would follow! She said, "Caring for such dumb animals was a piece of work." So many animals can exist in the wild on their own. There are wild horses, wild cats, and wild dogs, but there are no wild sheep. I can only imagine how hard it must have been to care for an animal whose proneness to wander seems part of their nature.

⁶ John 10:11

⁷ John 10:10

Like most people in our modern culture, we tend to think of ourselves as pretty independent, more intelligent than most, and generally capable of making the right decisions. Consequently, most of us don't want a shepherd. We prefer to have a consultant on a retainer, whom we only call upon when we get into a real jam. A shepherd's relationship with his sheep is different; he lives with the sheep and does not go home. And why not? Because without his constant care, the sheep will wander and wind up in grave danger.

Therefore, the Shepherd has to be everything for the sheep. He is the sheep's protector, provider, physician, leader, guide, and owner. Thus, a sheep has everything it needs when it has a shepherd.

That is why Psalm 23's description of the relationship between the Shepherd and his sheep uses the most personal and intimate of terms. It has more personal pronouns, such as "I," "me," "my," and "mine," than you will find in all the psalter. Moreover, it was written by David from the vantage point of a life mellowed by years and a faith made strong by numerous trials. Therefore, he could confidently say, regardless of dangers and dark valleys that might lie ahead, "*Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*"⁸

⁸ Psalm 23:6