

Feeling Sheepish  
John 10:11-18  
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In 2016, when my family and I visited Ireland, we spent an afternoon on a working sheep farm with the head shepherd. Not a job you hear a lot these days, huh? We got a chance to see how the shepherd's dog managed the herd, we watched one of the sheep being sheared, and my daughter Molly even got to feed one of the lambs. It was a fascinating experience, and I came away with two distinct conclusions about sheep: (1) they are loud, and (2) they are about as smart as my glass of water. The farmer told us God created sheep to make chickens look smart.

The image of God and Jesus as shepherds is pervasive throughout the Bible. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which \_\_\_ read, is replete with this imagery. Moses and David, two of the most prominent figures in the Hebrew scriptures, were shepherds. The prophets regularly used shepherd metaphors, and Psalm 100 says, "Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."

Jesus picks up on this shepherd language in the gospels. He describes himself as the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to find the lost one. Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus looked with pity upon the people because they were "as sheep without a shepherd." Jesus told his disciples that when he was struck down, the sheep would be scattered. And when he appeared to them after the resurrection, the last words Jesus speaks to Peter are, "Feed my sheep."

So let me get this straight. Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my shepherd." Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." Does that mean we're the sheep? I'm not sure I like that very much. We're sheep? I think of the 4-H fairs back in southern Indiana, walking along the straw-covered barn floor and looking at pen after pen of these slobbering, smelly animals. That's not how I like to think of myself. But the Bible's pretty clear on this one: we are sheep. Can I get a B-A-A? And that means if we're the sheep, we are called to be followers of the shepherd.

That idea of being a follower doesn't sit too well in our world today. You know the saying about a dog sled team: If you're not the lead dog, the view never changes. In our world there is an overwhelming focus on the art of leadership and an underwhelming focus on the practice of followership. Everyone wants to be a shepherd; no one wants to be a sheep. How many times have you been offered the opportunity to participate in a seminar on how to be a good follower? How many good books have you read lately on how to follow an effective leader? Nobody dreams big dreams about being a follower. Nobody wants to grow up to be a sheep.

In our internet-driven society, being an influencer is a legitimate occupation. Thousands of people on social media court attention through funny videos, podcasts, skincare routines, and death-defying stunts, all in an effort to get people to watch them. Those watchers? They're called followers. The more followers you have, the more popular you are. There's no money or power in following; you have to be an influencer.

The call to follow butts up against our distinctly American sensibilities. This country was built on the foundation of rugged individualism and not doing what the King told us to do, and that mindset is still prevalent today. Just about every TV commercial

we see tells us that if we want to be unique, we should join the millions of other people who use this product. Someone has tried to sell us on the supremacy of individuality, and we've bought it. But as we've seen, scripture is clear: we are called to be followers of the Good Shepherd.

What does that involve? In this passage, Jesus boils down the responsibilities of a sheep to two things: stay with the flock and listen for the shepherd's voice. That's it, really. Reminds me a bit of the Great Commandment: Love your shepherd with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love the other sheep in your flock. If sheep do those two things, then the shepherd can guarantee them protection. The good shepherd is even willing to lay down his life for the sheep, but he can only do that if we stay in the flock and follow his lead.

The Irish shepherd told us an interesting fact about sheep. When a sheep falls over onto its back—what shepherds call being “cast”—it can't get up on its own. Its center of gravity shifts, its legs flail in the air, and the more it struggles, the worse things become. If left there too long, the sheep could die, either from exposure or internal distress.

What's I find really interesting is that casting doesn't discriminate. Sometimes it happens because their wool has grown too heavy or the footing is uneven. It can happen to a sheep with great cholesterol or a sheep with high blood pressure, a sheep who drives a new Ferrari or a sheep who drives a Ford Pinto. Doesn't matter. And when it happens, the sheep doesn't just need encouragement. It doesn't need advice shouted from a distance. It doesn't need someone to say, “I'll pray for you.” It needs a shepherd – someone who will come, lift it up, steady it, and set it back on its feet.

Philip Keller, a shepherd and writer, said that when he found a cast sheep, he would gently roll it upright, then hold it there for a while, rubbing its legs to restart the circulation before letting it go. Otherwise, it might just fall right over again. Psalm 23 says, “He restores my soul.” That's not poetic fluff; it's what the Good Shepherd does for us. It means God finds us when we are helpless, when we've gotten ourselves stuck, sometimes through our own choices sometimes through no fault of our own. Have you ever felt cast? We sheep can look strong and capable and still end up flat on our backs, overturned by stress, comfort, pride, or exhaustion. And God doesn't just call to us from a distance. God comes near, lifts us, steadies us, and restores us.

In my own life, I have found that God has most often helped my back on my feet through the grace and generosity of others. That's why we need the other sheep in our flock. No matter how smelly they might be, no matter how much noise they sometimes make, community is essential to our survival. There's no such thing as a solitary sheep, and there's no such thing as an individual Christian. We are not religious individuals who happen to be members of a particular community; we are a community first, made up of individuals. The community is the means and the embodiment of grace for each of us. This is where we hear God's voice and learn to follow. Would this place hold the same meaning for us if we each had our own individual worship services? As sheep, we must be part of the flock, which means putting ourselves with our fellow sheep on a regular basis by worshipping together and serving together and just being together.

Being with the flock makes it easier to hear the shepherd's voice, because more ears are tuned to that frequency. Being able to recognize the shepherd's voice was crucial to the survival of the sheep. In Jesus' time, several shepherds would use the same watering hole, and often they would all arrive with their flocks at the same time. The

gathering became one big flock of thirsty sheep. But they were never worried about getting their sheep mixed up. When one shepherd was ready to leave, he'd make distinctive sound – a whistle, a cluck of the tongue – and his sheep would begin to separate themselves from the larger group, because they recognized their master's voice. Do we know God's voice when we hear it, spoken through a song or a scripture or a text from a friend at just the right time?

Along with hearing the shepherd's voice, we also have to respond to the shepherd's leading. It's interesting to note an important difference between cows and sheep. If you want a cow to go somewhere, you lead it from the front. But if you want to guide sheep, you herd them from behind. That's fascinating to consider when you think about God as our shepherd. So often we look for God out ahead of us, showing us the way, sending flashing neon arrows to guide us. And when we don't see that, we're disappointed. "Where is God?"

Maybe, instead of in front of us, God is behind us, nudging us, encouraging us. Maybe God's method of leading us isn't to show us the right decision to make, but rather to encourage us to use the gifts we have – our conscience, our hearts, our brains – to make the decision we feel is best, and then to walk alongside us into that decision. We expect God to lead us like cows – "God, show me what to do" – when the Good Shepherd is saying, "Do what you think is best – that's why I gave you free will in the first place." Often times, people will pray, "God, show me the perfect job" or "Bring me the perfect partner." Maybe God's role isn't to make the decision for us, but to empower us to decide for ourselves. I believe God isn't concerned whether we make this decision or that decision. I believe God wants us to be faithful to and glorify God, no matter what choice we make. Because God will be with us in any decision we make.

We are the sheep, called to be part of the flock, to listen for the master's voice, to follow our shepherd's guidance. The Lord is our shepherd, and he is a good shepherd, someone who cares enough to protect us when we are in need and loving enough to find us when we are lost, lifting us up when we are cast down. Our call isn't to be influencers, but to let ourselves be influenced by the good news of Jesus Christ, to be followers of the one who leads and guides us. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Praise God for that! OK, sheep, it's time to follow our Good Shepherd. Can I get a "B-A-A?"