

THE MESSAGE for May 15, 2011

John 10:1-11

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Future Church... Our Dedication

The sheep and shepherd image is a beautiful thing. Sheep need a shepherd and a shepherd needs sheep. It's a symbiotic relationship. Most of us tend to see sheep as cute and cuddly, harmless and helpless. Kind of like this gal. (*Hold up stuff animal of a sheep.*) Isn't she cute? Can I have an Awwwwwwe.... I believe Jesus had something very specific in mind when he talks about the sheep/shepherd metaphor.

Did you know that dogs were the first domesticated animals in history, sheep and goats came after that? Dogs make great companions. They are loyal through and through.

My dog wants to be with me all the time. If I'm watching TV, he's beside me in the chair or on the floor. If I'm working on the computer, he is curled up somewhere in the room. If I'm fixing a meal or a snack in the kitchen or sitting at the table eating, he is right there cleaning up the crumbs. When I come walking out of the bathroom, he's waiting for me. If I leave the house, for two minutes, two hour, two days, or two weeks - he greets me just the same – barking and wagging all over and jumping all around to welcome me home. There is nothing like the loyalty and dedication of a faithful dog.

I wonder why Jesus uses the sheep and shepherd image to describe our relationship with him instead of the dog and master image. Probably because a flock of sheep needs the shepherd a pack of dogs does not need a master.

I want to highlight four things about sheep – all four begin with the letter “D”

First: sheep are dumb. Sheep have this habit of being so focused on feeding themselves that they munch along for hours without looking up to see where they are going. All is well as long as they stay in their own pasture. But if someone leaves the gate open, sheep will munch their way right onto the highway and get run over without even knowing what hit them. Sheep also have a natural instinct to follow the rest of the herd anywhere, even if the herd is headed to the slaughter house or going over a cliff. Sheep are dumb.

Second: sheep are directionless. If a sheep wanders off from the flock, it has a very slim chance of finding its way back. Sheep have no sense of direction. They won't panic but they won't do much about getting un-lost either. They will just go on their way not making much effort to find their way back to the flock. And since they are directionless they need the shepherd to lead them to green pastures where they can find food and drink. Left on it's own a lost sheep is sure to die in the wilderness. Sheep are directionless.

Third: sheep are defenseless. They don't have claws, fangs, stingers, wings, camouflage, or a fearsome roar. When confronted with danger, there isn't much for them to do except run with the herd and hope that a slower sheep is behind them. They have absolutely no means of protecting themselves from danger. If they are attacked, they're doomed! When sheep get particularly woolly, they have a tendency to lose their balance. They have been known to roll over onto their backs and, like turtles, are unable to right themselves without help. Of course, if a predator approaches, well end of story. Sheep are defenseless.

So there you have it. Sheep are **dumb, directionless, and defenseless...**

But there is one more thing about sheep, they have at least one remarkable talent. They can distinguish one human voice from another and therefore they are dependent on the shepherd. **Sheep are dependent.** They listen to the voice of the shepherd for life and they will follow no one else.

In fact, research suggests that sheep can recognize the faces of other sheep and the face of their shepherd. Point is, without a shepherd, sheep are in serious trouble. You won't find a wild sheep loose in a field or a forest somewhere. They are utterly dependent upon the flock and the shepherd for their lives.

Jesus refers to us as sheep and he our shepherd. If someone were to describe you as dumb, directionless, defenseless, and utterly dependent upon someone else for life, would you be honored? Probably not!

If we're honest, Jesus' words are rather offensive. I mean, who wants to be a sheep? Ask any child what kind of animal they'd like to be, they'll probably say a lion or a tiger or an eagle. You probably won't hear a child say, "Wow, I'd like to be a sheep."

Maybe it's not that Jesus thinks so little of us, maybe it's that we tend to think too much of ourselves. Bear with me here for a minute. Self-esteem is a beautiful thing. Parents, we should raise our children to be confident and competent in life. We need to celebrate our gifts and skills and talents that God has given to each one of us. But when it comes to navigating our way through life, many of us overestimate our abilities. I know I do. We are probably more like sheep than we care to admit.

I also think we tend to underestimate the dangerous world in which we live. It's a wilderness out there. It's not safe to go it alone. We face real temptations that entice us in the direction of disaster. Left on our own we too like sheep are doomed and we'll make poor choices.

Why does Jesus call us sheep? Because the world is a dangerous wilderness and we need a shepherd to guide us and protect us and provide for us.

Today 7 young people have affirmed/confirmed their baptism. The new life we share in Christ. For some, this is a moment in their spiritual journey that feels like a major step of freedom. In reality – they are saying they want to take greater responsibility for their own faith development. This isn't the end this is just the beginning. We celebrate this major step with them, keeping in mind that too much freedom is not a good thing. Real faith maturity means growing more and more dependent on Jesus, the Good Shepherd within his flock.

Proverbs 3 sums it up well: “Trust God from the bottom of your heart; don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go; he's the one who will keep you on track. Don't assume that you know it all. Run to God! Run from evil!”

That's good advice for all of us. *Run to God. Run from evil. Listen to God's voice in everything you do and everywhere you go...*

The problem is we're not real good at listening when it comes to our relationship with God. We may think we are but we really aren't. We talk too much and listen too little. It takes work to listen for God in prayer or when reading the Bible or even in worship. Listening is a lost art in our busy culture. Or worse we misunderstand the situation when it comes to hearing God's voice.

Did you heard about a guy who thought his wife was loosing her hearing. He decided to do a little test without her knowing about it. One evening he sat in a chair on the far side of the room. Her back was to him, and she could not see him. Very quietly he whispered, “Can you hear me?” There was no response. Moving a little closer, he asked again, “Can you hear me now?” Still, no response. Quietly he moved closer and whispered the same words, but still no answer. Finally, he moved right in behind her chair and said, “Can you hear me now?” She whipped around and said, “For the fourth time, yes!”

God is still speaking, if we can find a way to slow down and tune out all the other voices.

As we move into the future we will be called into deeper dependence on Jesus, the Good Shepherd. That means more than ever we are being called into new ways of seeing ourselves and the world around us. That means more than ever we need to listen to the voice of Jesus, our Shepherd, and follow him wherever he leads us.

I don't know about you but I can hardly wait to see where Jesus is going to lead us next. Amen.