

Copyright May 6 & 7, 2017. All Rights Reserved. Geist Christian Church

Title: Confessing Sheep

Date: May 6 & 7, 2017

Preaching: Senior Minister Randy Spleth

Scripture: [Psalm 23](#)

Text: [John 10:1-3, 11-15](#)

E-mail: [Randy Spleth](#)



I was never good at playing "Follow the Leader." That shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who knows me. I am self-directed. I like being in charge. When I was a child, I was good at playing "King on the Mountain." I was miserable at "Follow the Leader."

These confessions are familiar to some of you. You too prefer "King on the Mountain" to "Follow the Leader." In a successful community like ours, there are many leaders. You can't achieve much in life if you don't have some degree of initiative and self-direction. Individualism sets you a part. "It's a micro versus a macro thing," someone one said recently to me. "I'm in charge of my own life. God's in charge of the big stuff."

It is particularly American point of view. Herbert Hoover called it "rugged individualism" suggesting that all individuals, or nearly all individuals, can succeed on their own. He was restating what Horatio Alger Jr. wrote about in novels popular in the late 19th century. He created the myth that every American has the opportunity to go from rags to riches, to discover success and wealth through hard work, courage, and determination. We don't need each other. Like the pioneers who founded our nation, we too can overcome adversity on the strength of our own self-reliance. We are rugged individualists.

Then we come to today's text on Shepherd Sunday. Four weeks after Easter, churches all over the world remember one of the most famous statements that Jesus makes about himself. "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11a) Most of us think of Sunday school art, those nice pastoral scenes of Jesus walking among sheep, suitable for any nursery. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Or, we think of the 23rd Psalm, imagining a Hallmark picture of Jesus leading us to green pastures or

still waters. It's nice and sweet; there is nothing challenging in Jesus being Good Shepherd until you ask yourself, "If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who are the sheep?"

A colleague of mine was offended by what his daughter was being taught in church. She came home singing Brian Howard's children's song, "I just wanna be a sheep." Young children love his music. The chorus goes, "I just wanna be a sheep. Baa, baa, baa, baa. I just wanna be a sheep. Baa, baa, baa, baa. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. I just wanna be a sheep. Baa, baa, baa, baa. It is one of those songs that get in your heads and if you are 6 or 7, you just drive everyone nuts singing it over and over and over again. "I just wanna be a sheep." ¹

Just how many of you want to be a sheep? Hold on. Before you answer that question, let me ask it another way. How many of you want or wanted your children to grow up and be sheep? How many of you want or wanted your children to say, "I really don't want to stand-out or be special. I just want to follow the crowd. I just want to be a part of the masses." How many of you told your kids, "If someone jumps off a cliff, you jump with them. Follow like sheep." Sheep do that you know.

In a few weeks I'm taking a sabbatical: a summer for study and renewal. On my last sabbatical, when traveling in Turkey following the footsteps of Paul, I heard this amazing story about sheep. Shepherds eating breakfast near the town of Gevas, were surprised to see a lone sheep jump off of a nearby cliff and fall to its death. They were stunned, however, when the rest of the nearly 1,500 sheep in the herd followed, each leaping off of the same cliff. Four hundred and fifty sheep perished in a billowy, white pile. Those that jumped from the middle and end of the herd were saved as the pile became higher and the fall more cushioned. The estimated loss was over \$100,000.²

I just want to be a sheep. Baa, baa, baa. No thanks. I want to be in charge. If I can't be the shepherd, I want to at least be the sheep dog. I want to go around telling all of those stupid sheep to get back where they belong. Be honest now. How many of you want to be a cliff jumping sheep, baa, baa, baa, versus a sheepdog, bow, wow, wow.

But, Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd" which implies something about you and me. It implies we are sheep and when it comes to sheep, we are fully aware of their helplessness. This is why we take Jesus statement, "I am the Good Shepherd" and make it into Sunday

school poster art for kids. We don't want to limit our power and authority. We don't want to put Jesus in the ultimate position. We want to be in charge of our lives and let God take care of the big stuff.

But when Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd" he is saying, I'm in charge of more than the big stuff. We don't hear it that way because we've lost the context. Context is everything.

"I am the Good Shepherd" is a very political comment. The crowd first listening to Jesus understood that shepherd was a very common metaphor for describing the leaders and kings. Moses appoints Joshua as his successor "...so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd." (Numbers 27:17b) At age 30, David takes the throne from Saul because "The Lord saidIt is you who shall be shepherd of my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel." (2 Samuel 5:2b)

The Shepherd was also a metaphor for God's relationship to Israel. In Psalm 95: "Come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our God our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep of His hand." (Psalm 95:7) And in Isaiah we hear the famous words put to tune in the Messiah. "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom..." (Isaiah 40:11)

It didn't take very long for the image of God being a shepherd to connect with the Messiah being a shepherd. Prophecies like Micah 5 told of a Messiah to come from God. "And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure..." (Micah 5:4) Ezekiel says, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd." (Ezekiel 34: 23)

This was spoken long after David was dead and buried, so God is clearly referring to David's descendant as the one who would be the Messiah of Israel. When Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd," people listening understood what he was suggesting. He was claiming to be the Messiah.

But the "I Am" phrases in John are even more radical than a political statement about his Messiahship. Jesus is also making a theological statement by the language he uses. Remember when Moses stood before the burning bush and was told by God to go to Egypt. Moses says he needs to know God's name to fulfill that assignment. "God said

to Moses, "I am who *I am*." ...say to the Israelites, "***I am*** has sent me to you.... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." (Exodus 3: 14, 15b)

When Jesus is saying "I am the Good Shepherd, he is claiming to be I AM", God in the flesh who is the Messiah. There are really only two responses to this claim. You either stone him or serve him. You either think he's a madman or the Messiah. You either choose to give him your allegiance, get in the sheepfold and follow or decide to go it on your own and live by your own authority.

Jesus, ever the artful preacher realizes that he has stunned them. He's asked them for commitment. He asked them to play follow the leader, to get into the fold, to wanna be sheep. While they are struggling to understand this, he returns them to the familiar saying, "I know my own and my own know me." (John 10:14b)

Most of us have not been around sheep. In an agricultural society, understanding that sheep have keen hearing is common. Sheep have the ability to discern the voice of their shepherd from among many others. In fact, shepherds divide herds based upon their different voices. First century listeners knew that shepherds do indeed know their sheep. They not only know the name of the sheep, they likely know when the sheep was born, the circumstances of its birth, if it has experienced any broken bones or illnesses. He also knows the sheep's temperament, whether it tends to wander or fight or follow. It is what being a shepherd all is about.

Talking about something so familiar was disarming. It made Jesus' statement about being the Good Shepherd a little less radical. A few likely thought, "Whew! For a moment I thought he was talking about being the 'Good Shepherd, the Messiah.' Maybe he's just talking about shepherding in general." But they would have only thought it for a moment because he returns to the shock value "I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:14b) Shepherds don't die for their sheep. If the shepherd dies, the sheep would be vulnerable; the death of the shepherd would sacrifice the entire flock.

It is where it becomes a little confusing. Lambs die. The sheep are ultimately led to slaughter. It is another reason we have an aversion to being sheep. We don't want to be sheep because we don't want to be slaughtered like a bunch of sheep butchered for Easter rack of lamb. We don't wanna be sheep. Then Jesus confuses us and says, "I lay down my life for the sheep." What?

Leaders and kings don't die for their flock. Who would lead the tribe or country? We do everything possible to protect our president. Secret service men all around, ready to take a bullet. Leaders and kings, presidents and Messiah's don't die. It is the sheep that are sacrificed.

One of the things I will do on my sabbatical is visit churches. Whenever I travel, particularly in Europe, I can't get enough of them. There is an interesting old church in Werden, Germany on the Ruhr River. There is a carved figure of a lamb at a point near the top of the steeple. When the church was being built, one of the craftsmen fell from the scaffolding. As the other workers rushed to find him, fully expecting he had died from the terrible fall, they were shocked to find him shaken up, but alive! As he was falling, a flock of sheep was grazing nearby and he landed on top of a lamb. Though the lamb was killed, it also broke the man's fall, and he was saved.

In recognition of that amazing event, the other craftsmen carved the lamb and placed it on the tower at the exact spot from which the man had fallen. It was a reminder of the time a man was saved by a lamb.³ And of course, it reminds everyone who looks at that lamb, of a time when the sheep are saved by the shepherd, when the Good Shepherd lays down his life for sheep who are in his flock.

It is an interesting twist, one which takes time to unfold. The Shepherd becomes the Lamb. 'I AM' is not just the Good Shepherd. He is also the Lamb of God who lays down his life for the sheep.

I am occasionally asked, "Where do I confess in this church?" My answer is always, "We do that together, in worship, most often in prayer. Sometimes, I'll confess for all of us in the sermon." I suppose this is one of those times, even though I run the risk of confessing something you do not believe applies to you. But, I'm willing to do this because I suspect, almost all of us have some degree of resistance to being sheep.

Here is the confession. The great I AM, the powerful God of all Creation, so loved us that God comes to us as the Son, as Jesus to be our Good Shepherd, to gather us together as a flock and lead us into eternity. He does so not just by guiding our path. He does so by taking on our role as sheep, by becoming the lamb himself and dying that we might be saved. But we are so prideful, so self-directed and self-sufficient, that we don't wanna be sheep. We want to be in charge, to be the shepherd or at least a sheep dog.

I confess it and I hope that my confession includes you. Oh great I AM, our Good Shepherd, who becomes the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, accept our confession and in it, offer grace. I pray by your grace you will turn our bow wow wows, into baa, baa, baa. Help us to wanna be sheep.

¹ Leonard Sweet. I got this from idea from a sermon on Revelation about the Lamb of God.

² 450 Sheep Jump to Their Deaths in Turkey", washingtonpost.com (7-8-05);

³ John A. Huffman, Jr., Accepting Others, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, 06 October 2003, 15.