

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 4, May 15, 2011 dedicated to our 2010-2011 teachers, to Vic Jennette, Jessica Underwood, Mars Robinson and Karen Mozingo our newest members, to Bill Beckett for his 15 months of unmatched service to our staff and congregation, and always to the glory of God!*

## **“A Sheep Dog’s View of People Like This”**

**Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10**

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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John 10:1 opens the Gospel’s chapter on Jesus as our Good Shepherd. It is an image that we love for our Lord. The Good Shepherd is one who lays down his life for the sheep. He guides his flock. He knows his sheep by name. He leads them from trouble to the still waters. He makes life safe for them by comforting them and allowing them to “lie down in green pastures.” While all these make great preaching images, the flip side is that most of us think of sheep as slobbering, untidy, dumb animals that exist only to be sheered and slaughtered.

Being a city boy most of my life, I have had little experience or exposure to sheep in their natural environment. This week I read something from someone who grew up on a sheep farm in the Midwest. He claims that cattle ranchers are largely responsible for spreading the rumors that sheep are

dumb. He claims that you stand behind cattle and make loud noises to get them running in front of you. But if you stand behind sheep and make loud noises, all they do is run around behind you because they prefer to be led. So, he says, you **push cows** and you **lead sheep**. Sheep will not go anywhere if someone does not go first. They really need a shepherd who goes ahead of them to show them that everything is all right (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, Cowley Publications, Boston, MA, 1993, pp. 140-141).

He says sheep grow fond of their shepherd. He says once they came to know him, it never ceases to amaze him that he could walk through his sleeping flock without disturbing one of them, while a stranger could not step one foot into the flock without causing total panic. Sheep see their shepherd as part of the family. Their relationship is special and they develop a language among them that is their own. A good shepherd learns to distinguish between bleats of pain and pleasure, while the sheep learn his cluck of the tongue, which means food or a two note song that means it is time to go home. (Ibid, p. 141)

In his little book, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller tells stories of his days as a shepherd that match the stories of our Midwestern shepherd. Keller says that a Good Shepherd plants and tends green pastures, invests in the medical care of his flock, makes them feel safe enough that they are able to lie down to sleep.

He also tells stories of sheep who lead others in the flock away from the safety and protection of the shepherd and the other sheep. One such sheep that Keller calls "Mrs. Gadabout" was beautiful and perfect in her looks. But she was always restless with him as a shepherd. She would do anything she could to lead others away from the flock - seeking breaks in the fence to crawl through and even waiting for low tide to walk around the seaside fence line. The fields she led them to were close to cliffs and filled with unhealthy and scant fields of food. He spent much of his time pursuing

Mrs. Gad-about. When her lambs were born, she taught them her same fence crawling and runaway approach to life.

With Mrs. Gad-about it was an ingrained habit. She was simply not content with the things as they were. In time, as she continued to lead his flock into danger through her obstinate, discontented ways, he struggled with what to do. He loved her like the others. She was strong and beautiful and alert. But, in the end, she was not good for the flock or safe for them. Finally, Phillip had to take her life for the good of the flock. Once she was gone, there was peace once again in the flock (Keller, from *Psalm 23*, chapter 2, "I Shall Not Want," pp. 32-34).

A shepherd knows how to manage the flock.

In Palestine and Israel, you can see Bedouin shepherds bringing their flocks home from the various pastures in the mountains. In fact, there are shepherds and sheep still on in the "shepherd fields" made so famous in Luke's telling of the Christmas story and Jesus' birth. It is wild to see eight or nine small flocks gather at a watering hole to form a huge convention of thirst sheep only to hear their shepherd make a call and watch the distinctive flock recollect themselves and head home. They know their shepherd's voice. They know his call. They will follow only his voice.

Jesus was always concerned about his flock. While there were those who wished to call him "Messiah," which for them meant warrior, king, and political leader, Jesus wanted them to see him as a Good Shepherd. As with David before him, he wanted them to understand he was different. He wanted people to belong to his flock, to listen to his voice (and not the "gad abouts" of his time), to follow him, to trust that he would care for them and keep them safe. He wanted them to know that if they stayed with the flock, if they didn't wander off and seek other fields, they would know the "abundance and fullness of life."

He also demonstrated by his death on the cross that he would lay down his life for his flock - which is the ultimate sacrifice of love which the Good Shepherd gives to his flock. He gave it all for those whom he loved and cared for. He was the ultimate Good Shepherd.

The sacrificial love of the Good Shepherd was not lost on the first Christians. In Acts 2:42-47, we see the early church as a people who came together, worked together and shared all things in common. Those who had means would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. They were together daily. They broke bread at home, and had glad and generous hearts, praising God and goodwill for all people. Because of this singular spirit, they added to their numbers each day.

William Barclay speaks in his commentary of the characteristics of the church. He says, "It was a **Learning Church**; it was a **church of fellowship**; it was **praying church**; it was a **reverent church**; it was a **church where things happened**; it was a **sharing church**; it was a **worshiping church**; it was a **happy church** and it was a **church whose people others could not help but liking**. In other words this church had a **winsome attractiveness**. (William Barclay's *Commentary on Acts*, the Daily Bible Series, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1976, pp.28-29)

Real Christianity is a lovely and beautiful thing. When we learn together, fellowship together, pray together, revere God, the earth and one another, when we make things happen, when we share freely and joyfully, when we worship and sing; and live in the joy of the Gospel - what is not to like about us? We are winsome! We are attractive!

When we, as the flock of the Good Shepherd, follow him, all of these qualities of our life together come out. When we follow the Mrs. Gad-about of our times, we end up in fields and places where bad things happen to good people.

**This is where the sheep dog comes in.** For a long time, I have been concerned with the church connecting the Good Shepherd, which is Jesus Christ, with its pastors. While it is humbling to receive feedback about being a “good shepherd” in relation to the congregation (or flock in this case), it is an image that is associated somewhat incorrectly.

I see pastors as sheep dogs. That’s right. We are like the Old English Sheepdog (not to be confused with the shepherd’s dog). The OES has a long tradition of herding the flock. We support the Good Shepherd by herding his flock toward the direction he is intending them to go. With the flock as spread out as ours, this sheep dog does a lot of herding and running around! So does Dr. Janine “Sheep Dog” Wilson.

Old English sheepdogs are known for surrounding the sheep and keeping them together. It is both ingrained in the dogs but also a learned behavior. The Old English Sheepdog is generally regarded as a friendly and lovable animal with an even temperament. But that wasn't always the case. Many decades ago, the dogs were considered angry and hard to manage. Years of breeding, however, have eliminated those traits for the most part. These sheepdogs have long been herders, and that instinct remains obvious even with those who spend their lives predominantly indoors as pets. These dogs will attempt to “herd” other pets and people as they walk around the house or yard. Fortunately, the Old English Sheepdog herds by bumping, not by biting! In a worst case scenario, a person will be on the receiving end of nothing worse than a wet-nosed bump from a furry friend.

From a Web site on the OES, I share these insights: The Old English Sheepdog has a great time with people and loves play. The amiable Old English is jolly but gentle. At home, it is a well-mannered house pet that often amuses its family with comical antics. It thrives on human companionship and is very much a homebody. It is extremely devoted to its family and protective of family members, tending children as flock members. The OES is also friendly toward strangers - which

doesn't make them the best watch dogs. Those who know and love him are familiar with his sense of humor. He can be playful and comical, although he is also the guardian and protector of his family. He is highly adaptable as well.

But some Old English Sheepdogs can be headstrong. That being said, this breed does seem to have a desire for some time spent away from the rest of the family. So, it is not surprising to find the Old English Sheepdog occasionally "takes a break from the action" in another room.

Besides herding, the OES is also known for its ability to search and rescue those who are lost. This is yet another trait helpful in the service of the Good Shepherd.

So, as we consider our Good Shepherd today, think of the good fit that comes from a Good Sheepdog with a good flock of faithful followers. Well matched - Good Shepherd to the qualities and characteristics of a great church - you will find the Good Sheepdog happily herding, guiding and steering the family and the flock to keep them together, to keep them moving forward, to keep them faithful to their Good Shepherd, who will lead them to abundant life in this world and the next.

So, what is a sheep dog's view of the Good Shepherd and the church described in Acts 2? Well, the shaggy dog loves what he sees. He can't wait to herd sheep such as this for the Master such as he is. Amen.

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