

“Flocks, Communities, or Clowders”
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Acts 2: 42 – 47

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

John 10: 1 – 10

¹ “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It has been suggested, from time to time, that I might be, just maybe,
 a wee bit stubborn when it comes to wanting to be independent,
 and doing things my way,
 which is often not the way I've been told to do something.

Not only have my parents known this about me for some time,
 I suspect they have used it against me.

My father, at some point when I was in high school or college, at Christmastime, brought out a wedge of his favorite blue cheese, Stilton, and declared it “Man’s Cheese.” Only for the men. So I promptly started not only, eating it, but learning to really like it.

When I was in seminary and started dating a very nice man who happened to be heavily tattooed and pierced, and drove a Harley-Davidson, my parents knew enough not to forbid or even discourage me from dating him. It would be several years before I would meet Ben, but to that point he was the nicest man I had ever dated. And I have no doubt that if my parents had forbid me, I likely would have married him.

And then, when I started ministry in Arthurdale, I was told by some of the male members of the church that I would certainly need to find someone to mow my lawn because, well, I was a girl. How do you think I responded? I did my research, bought the Snapper push-mower we still own today, and mowed the lawn by myself. Even if I did have to get help from time-to-time with the pull-cord start, I was determined to prove them wrong.

Now, unlike my own immature responses in those previous examples, being told you can't do something **has** worked to the benefit of our world in many instances.

Being stubborn, going our way.
It's an American quality.
The rugged individualist.
The explorer.
What we aspire to.

The problem with that is that it while this can sometimes be a successful strategy for life,
it is NOT what we are instructed to do in the life of faith.

The life of faith, where it's not about me, it's about us.
The community, described in Acts, cares for one another.
The earliest community—what the Bibles tells us we are to aspire to- caring for one another.
“praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

And in John, we are the sheep. Jesus is the gate. Jesus is the shepherd.

We are the community. We are the sheep.
That listen. That follow Jesus.¹

Not to follow blindly, follow faithfully.
Not because sheep are stupid, because they are smart.

¹ While not quoted directly, and while I have gone in some different directions, I relied heavily on this article from D. Mark Davis in studying the gospel text in its original language.
<http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/05/figurative-speech-with-twist.html>

Some fifteen or more years ago, National Public Radio reported this story²,

...the lowly sheep may have gotten a bad rap. That's the conclusion of a new study on sheep behavior by British scientists, who say the easily herded creatures may be smarter than originally thought.

A study published in the Journal *Nature* describes research at the Babraham Institute in...England. In the research project, sheep were shown pictures of other sheep and rewarded with food if they moved toward a selected image.

The study concluded that, like humans, sheep have special systems in the brain to discern between faces that are very similar in appearance. The results also suggest that sheep have remarkably good memory systems and are extremely good at recognizing faces. Both are signs of higher intelligence, says Dr. Keith Kendrick, one of the authors of the study.

Sheep, are intelligent. Consider that.

And so, when Jesus describes us as sheep,

it is important to realize that he is not telling us to be blind followers

Jesus is telling us to follow wisely, carefully.

We are not compared to a clowder of cats,

scurrying in every direction when you try and have them obey,
good for little else than a wonderful youtube video.³

We are sheep. Sheep who discern and choose who to follow.

Jesus calls us to follow. To obey. To submit.

They are commandments, not suggestions, after all.

Love God. Love neighbor. Love self.

Love not as we want to be loved but as Jesus loved.

These are commandments we have been given.

² National Public Radio. All Things Considered. November 7, 2001.

<http://www.npr.org/programs/atc/features/2001/nov/sheep/011107.sheep.html>

³ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4429316/Photographer-tries-line-10-playful-kittens.html#v-2143739083574824294>



And that's not easy. Because it means we don't get to go our own way.

What's best for me, isn't the yardstick we are called to use in making our decisions.

We are to ask what's best for us.

It's much easier to lean on our own understandings.⁴

Why is it so hard for us to trust the way of Jesus? My colleague Andrew Foster-Connors⁵ has preached that it is because we all know what it is like to have our trust broken.

But whatever your intellect, whatever your ethical sophistication, whatever your confidence in the world or in yourself, it is a rare human being who hasn't had their trust broken. Trust broken in politicians or in the political process. Trust broken in the church or in its pronouncements. Trust broken as a child by an abusive adult. Trust broken by a parent. Trust broken by a stranger. Trust in your body broken by an illness. Trust broken by a friend. Trust broken in a marriage. Trust broken in your dreams. It is a rare human being who hasn't been injured or abandoned by those who are charged to protect.

I can't name those hired hands and wolves, but I know they exist even for the most confident of sheep. And once you've been abandoned by a false shepherd, once you've had your security damaged by a wolf, it's hard to sleep soundly at night, it's hard to know who you can trust, it's hard to regain that safe space again.

Trust is hard.... Sometimes it's easier to imagine walling ourselves off from potential threats than trust..... Every sheep needs a shepherd she can trust. Every sheep needs a shepherd he can trust. The church claims this shepherd is Jesus Christ - the one who doesn't leave the fold when the darkness falls; the one who lays down his life for the sheep; the one who stands for even the most vulnerable of sheep. The church claims this shepherd can be trusted.

How do we follow Jesus? As the early Christians did, through trust.

Through faith in the shepherd.

The shepherd who always searches even for the one sheep who has wandered.

The shepherd who always opens the gate for the sheep who wants to come home.

The shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep.

This is what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus.

The one who later on will tell Simon Peter:

Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep.⁶

⁴ Proverbs 3:5-6, New International Version "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;"

⁵ Andrew Foster Connors, a paper written for the lectionary study group "The Well" in 2012, meeting in Montreat, North Carolina.

⁶ ¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ A second time he said to him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to

We live in a world of Republican and Democrat and Liberal and Conservative, Libertarian and Independent, Rich and Poor, Immigrant and Citizen, and there are so many sides reasons for us to be divided. And “...Sometimes it’s easier to imagine walling ourselves off from potential threats than trust”

Jesus reminds us today, we are in the same flock.

And we don’t get to choose our flock-mates.

We have the privilege of caring for those we find here,

That is where we meet Jesus,

we learn more about what it means to be saved and to rest,
really rest and trust, on those everlasting arms.

We may have different roads on how to get there,

but if we don’t start with our goal as the care of all of God’s children,
all of God’s sheep,

I don’t think we can call it the way of Jesus.

How **do** we get there?

What is the road to truly caring for our brothers and sisters?

Housing, food, health care, peace, love?

I don’t know. I wish I had that clear vision.

But I do know what Jesus says, and that is to follow him.

We follow the shepherd, the gate that opens the way.

Not alone. But together.

Not stationary, but in motion.

It is, finally, worth remembering that in this passage, the sheep do not stay put.

They go out into the world.

They are led to the pasture, for nourishment.

Which is what we will do in just a moment. At this table.

Be fed by the shepherd who created us and lived for us, who died and came back for us.

Who prays for us and leads us still,

that we might find ourselves saved in the praising of God
and having at our hearts the goodwill of all people.

And not only is that better than individual stubbornness or success,
it is life itself.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

him, “Tend my sheep.”¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.