



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

From Flock to Friends

By The Rev. Sharon K. Gracen

April 29, 2012

Shepherd - a lovely image of strong protection and peaceful grazing in the fields of the Lords. That is what we are in the earliest stages of our Christianity. We are drawn to this figure who represents security and care. One of my favorite hymns is the paraphrase of the King James version of Psalm 23; "the King of Love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine forever." The problem is that I am not comfortable being thought of as a sheep. Let me read this observation from *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*; "Sheep are not only dependent creatures; they are also singularly unintelligent, prone to wandering and unable to find their way to a sheepfold even when it is within sight." As I said, this is not how I want to be. I don't think any of us should want to be thought of as such a creature. Apparently I am not alone in this sentiment. I came across a term coined in the 50s in at Emory University journal article titled "We the Sheeple." It is a term of disparagement in which people are likened to sheep, as a herding animal. It describes those who voluntarily acquiesce to a suggestion without critical analysis or research. By doing so, they undermine their own individuality and may willingly give up their rights.

And yet sheep is a much used spiritual metaphor so I don't get to just toss it aside. There are nearly 400 references to sheep in the Bible and 100 more to shepherds. One reason for that is that sheep were the primary economic engine of nomadic life. They provided food in their milk and meat, they could survive on little water and grass, and could be easily moved to new pastures. Because they were so valuable, they became the offerings of the sacrificial system. If we are to be thought of as sheep, I hope that it is in the context of being a part of God's economy, a valuable part used for good.

Shepherds in the Bible are a recurring theme, particularly in the Old Testament; Abraham, Isaac and his betrothed Rebecca, Jacob, Moses, his wife and sisters in law, David, and the Prophet Amos are all found tending the sheep at some point in their stories. It is a lonely, dirty, smelly, and sometimes dangerous job and people do it until they could get someone else to do it for them, the children, then the youngest children, slaves and people who can't get any other job. So as loving as it sounds for Jesus to claim the title, in reality by doing so, he is aligning himself with people on the margins of society. Shepherds were not anybody's pick for dinner guests. And that is exactly why they were the first ones to receive the tidings of glad joy. They were the ones that needed it most.

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I've spent a lot of time this week researching and thinking about sheep and how they behave as a flock. We've already established that individually they are not bright. But in a flock, they have an intelligence that is greater, their behavior serves to protect individual members and they are safer as a group than certainly any sheep that has wandered off, not an uncommon occurrence. Some animals exhibit sophisticated behavior in groups. The amazing videos of swarms of starlings, up to 300,000, creating a joyous choreography in the evening sky. Their precision and changes of direction emerge from their just being together, flying in close proximity but never touching, nature's version of the Blue Angels. Herds of elephants very intentionally put the smaller and weaker members in the center so the heartier ones can serve as protectors. Dolphins will regulate the size of their pods according to purpose, smaller ones for feeding, larger ones for traveling, nursery pods for mothers with young which will also include elderly dolphins being protected by the others.

Although sheep may be a bit safer in a flock, I never found anything to indicate that in a flock they approach the intelligence of some of these other groups. They are easily influenced and afraid of everything. Seriously, I saw one amazing video of a flock of sheep in Stockholm being herded around by the family's pet bunny. Apparently the little rabbit watched the family herding dogs long enough to say, "I can do that!" and now spend its afternoons running the sheep ragged.

So all of these references, particularly in the Gospel of John in which Jesus alludes to us as sheep, causes me a bit of concern. There are 16 of them in John, "a good shepherd lays down his life his sheep;" "my sheep listen to my voice, I know them and they listen to me;" "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen;" and lastly, "Simon Peter, feed my sheep." But have no fear, we are not consigned to a limited and dull eternity. Jesus gives us the chance to be something else, *"I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father."* --John 15:15. What a different way to talk about followers, friends rather than sheep. Friends are endowed with a different kind of relationship. Sheep, even in a flock, relate to the shepherd as a provider and protector. Friends relate on a much more reciprocal level. Now, those who Jesus called sheep can, and indeed are, called to venture out of the safety of the group, just as Jesus empowered his disciples to go and eventually become shepherds in new pastures, bringing other people along until they are ready to own their status as friends of Christ. These new shepherds know from the beginning that their job is not just to tend the sheep, but to teach, inspire, model and in any possible bring new believers into full awareness, empowered to be servants of the kingdom which waits to emerge on earth.

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What a great way to end the story of a sheep, changed into something so much more free and creative. But there's more. I attended a terrific community conversation yesterday on diversity in Branford. Encountering someone who is different is one of those fear inducing triggers in the human heart and mind. Sheep are afraid of something as benign as a bunny rabbit. It takes people inspired with a higher knowledge and an understanding of humanity's purpose to see a friend in the guise of the stranger and create welcome. The conversations looked at what our town is like for immigrants who represent diverse cultures, speaking many languages, worshipping God in many ways. The assumption is that it is good for us to be a town of welcome and understanding but whose responsibility is it to undo ingrained, exclusive thinking. Our choices were the schools or the greater community and institutions like the churches or to just leave things alone to motor along and let things happen naturally in their own time. We heard from girl, a junior at the High School, from Bosnia and her experience of a classmate making derogatory comments about Muslims. When she pointed out that she is a Muslim, it was an uncomfortable learning experience for her classmate. Where did he learn what he thought he knew about all Muslims? That was really the target of our conversations. How do we learn what we claim to know about others? If we are sheep, we will be easily and unquestioningly led by the media, the images on video games, and voices of previous generations. But if we have learned well from the Good Shepherd, we will be influenced to open our embrace to other rather than take up arms against them. We know the abiding comfort and strength that allows us to have no fear. We will sit down at tables set in the presence of those we previously thought of as enemies and together discover that we are already dwelling together in the house of the Lord.

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