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John 10:1-10
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Sweaty Sheep

A pastor of a rich suburban church, during his children's sermon, told the kids that he was like a shepherd and the members of his congregation were like the sheep.

He then put this question to them: "What does the shepherd do for the sheep?"

A little guy raised his hand and answered, "He fleeces them."

Kid obviously knew a lot about raising sheep! But remind me not to use that during stewardship season!

Still, it does bring to mind the reputation that shepherds had back in Jesus' day had.

People just didn't think very highly of shepherds.

Shepherds sometimes allowed their sheep to graze on other people's land.

Shepherds were here today and gone tomorrow, moving from pasture to pasture.

Sometimes they left town without paying their bills. Sometimes people found prized possessions missing after a shepherd had moved on.

Shepherds also lived lonely, isolated lives. They seldom developed much in the way of social graces.

Shepherds were sometimes not even allowed to appear as witnesses in court ... because people didn't trust them.

So, it is an interesting name that Jesus attaches to himself when he calls himself the “Good Shepherd.”

He seemed even glad to identify with shepherds despite their dubious stature.

But let’s be careful not to sell shepherds short.

George Adam Smith, the 19th century biblical scholar tells of traveling one day in the Holy Land and coming across a shepherd and his sheep.

He fell into conversation with him and the man showed him the pen into which the sheep were led at night.

It consisted of four walls, with a single way in.

Smith asked him, “This is where they go at night?”

“Yep,” said the shepherd, “and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe.”

“But there is no door, no gate” said Smith.

“I am the gate,” said the shepherd. *(check out the front of the bulletin!)*

Now you need to know that his man wasn’t a Christian and he certainly wasn’t speaking in the language of the New Testament.

He was speaking from an Arab shepherd’s point of view.

Smith then looked at the man and asked, “What do you mean you are the gate?”

“Well, when the sun has gone down,” explained the shepherd, “and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open

space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body.

“I am the gate.”

Shepherds, for all their faults, were also fiercely loyal and devoted to their sheep.

They led their sheep, provided food and water for them, found them safe places to sleep, and searched for them when they were lost.

They tended to their wounds when they were hurt, and protected them from wild animals.

Knowing that, the image of Jesus as the “Good Shepherd” is more appealing, right?

Jesus chose the identify of a shepherd, precisely because a shepherd nurtured and protected his or her sheep.

And that is what Jesus wants to do for you and me.

And interestingly, the shepherd not only cares for his sheep, but he also knows each one by name, and as importantly, they know him.

Wherever they might wander off to, all he has to do is call for them and they will come running.

They will come running because they know who he is and know that in his care, they would be safe.

I heard a while back of an experiment to demonstrate just that. They gathered sheep from a number of different flocks into one big group. Then they had each shepherd call

his sheep and each sheep went to where their own shepherd was calling. They recognized his voice and they followed him.

And if you think about it, isn't Jesus just like that? Day in and day out, Jesus calls us. And when Jesus calls us, he calls us by name, too.

Our names are important, because they identify us personally.

We like having our names used. It makes us feel known. It makes us feel special, not just one of the crowd.

It makes a difference to have someone say, "Hi, Tom," as opposed to when someone just says, "hi."

Of course, there is one glaring exception to that.
(Anybody know???) ... it's salesmen.

Don't you just hate it when salesmen use your name, like they have known you for years? But, I digress...

The Good News is that Jesus isn't trying to sell us anything. And he knows us better than anyone!

A church bulletin board read, "Everybody welcome!" That sounds friendly, but the Good Shepherd doesn't just say, "Everybody welcome!"

The Good Shepherd "calls his own sheep by name." Jesus says, "Vivian, follow me! Faith, follow me! Bill, follow me! Marylyn, follow me! Mary, follow me! Emmanuel, follow me!"

He knows us personally, and calls each of us by name.

But maybe you say, "I don't hear my name being called." Maybe that is because you are not listening. You are not tuned in. Kind of like an old analog radio. You had to turn the dial back and forth to get the station. Well, we too need to turn ourselves back and forth to get in position to hear what God is saying to us.

The truth is, we most often hear Jesus not with our ears, but with our hearts, our spirits. So listen and you will hear.

And hear this: Jesus not only calls us by name, but he also calls us to great responsibilities -- great lives.

Today, many seminarians are people in their 40's and 50's, some even older. I was 46 when I finished seminary. I was certainly slow to hear God's call.

Many of them determined that their lives had been too small, so they answered Christ's call to a larger life. Some have made great sacrifices to do so.

There are countless stories of men and women giving up lucrative careers to go into the ministry. Not me!

I knew a couple – he was a lawyer and she was a doctor. Both were doing well in their chosen careers, but something was missing.

They searched and searched for meaning, but it seemed to always elude them.

Representing big corporate clients didn't bring any joy into Dan's life and being a doctor for an HMO frustrated his

wife (I can't remember her name now) more and more each year.

Then one day she was in church and it hit her. Christ was calling her to heal people in a very different way.

It took Dan longer to realize that he was being called away from the courtroom and into the pulpit ... but eventually they both got the message.

They quit their jobs and ended up at San Francisco Theological Seminary. They each gave up six figure salaries.

One of the ancillary benefits, I guess, was that unlike many students they didn't have to go into debt to go to school, but they did give up a lifestyle that they had lived for years.

A while ago, I heard that they are in the Northeast and doing quite well ... not nearly as wealthy \$ wise, but much wealthier in spirit and contentment.

Now, they actually look forward to waking up and facing each and every new day. And they do so with a spark that only Christ can provide.

Their congregation is blessed to have them. They are indeed remarkable people. And they do remarkable things.

Of course, Christ doesn't call all of us to go into ordained ministry, but he does call each of us to a ministry of one sort or another.

It is not important whether he calls us to things great or small, because he enlarges everything that he touches.

God called a widow to put her last penny in the collection plate. Jesus pointed her out to his disciples, and said that people would remember her for the rest of time.

Jesus called a boy to give five loaves and two fishes. When they boy obeyed, he used the child's offering to feed five thousand people.

Back in the 1950's, Christ called a man to use his gift of hospitality. That man put two extra plates on his table every Sunday, and invited two young people from a nearby boarding school for wayward youths to share his Sunday dinner.

He did this for many years, and in the process helped many young people to reinvest their energy in a positive way.

When he died the funeral home ran out of space, because so many people came to honor the man who had honored Christ with an extra plate.

Christ calls each of us to some sort of service. David McKenna, in his book, "Love Your Work," tells of a tombstone in a village graveyard.

The epitaph read: "Here lies Thomas Cobb - Who mended shoes in this village for forty years to the glory of God!"

Imagine that! If you needed a pair of shoes mended -- or a car repaired -- or a house built -- or your plumbing unstopped ...

Wouldn't you like to meet a cobbler -- or a mechanic -- or a carpenter -- or a plumber -- whom Christ had called to practice their trade to the glory of God?

George Eliot wrote a poem about the great violinmaker, Antonio Stradivarius. God had called Stradivarius to craft fine instruments.

Eliot wrote the following words as if Stradivarius had spoken them himself, "If my hand slacked I should rob God."

The point is that the world would have missed out on some of the finest made violins in the world if Antonio had not given his best to his craft and to God.

We are no different. Jesus calls each of us to do the best we can, with what we have been blessed with, to God's glory.

How differently would your job look if you viewed it as a calling from God?

How differently would you do your job if you felt like Jesus was watching over you?

The truth is that any job can be a ministry when we include Jesus in the equation.

But it's not just your vocation that God calls us to. Just think of the many acts of Christian service to which Christ calls people every week in this church.

People greet, usher, serve as liturgists, sing in the choir, plant flowers, pay bills, pull weeds, attend meetings, teach Sunday School, and perform a host of other duties for the glory of God.

Each of these small duties might seem inconsequential by themselves but, woven together, they become a chorus of praise.

Jakob Boehme put it this way. He said: “We are all strings in the concert of God’s joy.”

And so we are. Choir members know how important it is that each voice be precise in pitch and timing. Just ask Joel!

One person’s hesitancy can muddy the whole line.

If we are to make beautiful music together in this “choir” we call “life,” then we need to be in harmony with God’s will.

So, what has God called you to do for him? Has he called you to serve as a deacon or an elder?

You may that call in the next couple of weeks ... and I hope you have the courage to say “yes!”

Maybe he’s calling you to serve on a church ministry committee like Fellowship, Building and Grounds, Church and World, Youth, Children’s Education, Adult Education, Visibility, Membership, or Worship and Music.

Or, has he called you to teach a Sunday school class or to assist with the youth group?

Or maybe he is calling you to be one of his “sweaty sheep” (*you were waiting to see how I was going to include my sermon title, right?*) by climbing into the attic and run cat 5 cable from the electrical closet just outside the sanctuary to the janitor’s closet.

I did that on Friday and sweat so much, I bet I lost five pounds! Saturday Mike Manley came by and helped fix my mistakes. Apparently, Mike doesn’t sweat nearly as much as I do.

The point is, God calls each of us to some sort of service.
He is calling us by name! He is calling us to love him
and to serve him.

Listen carefully! Listen prayerfully!

And if you do, you too, will feel the power of serving God
and one another. There is no greater joy.

Amen!