

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“What to do when the Sheep Bite!”**

**Psalm 23
John 10:22 – 30**

April 10, 2016

Back in the days when I was still training for marathons, I did a lot of long-distance running on the rural country roads of north central Ohio. These were beautiful runs, over rolling hills, through some of the most pleasantly pastoral farmland you’re ever going to see. I loved it. But, pretty as it was, one thing you always had to be aware of was... *dogs*. Out in the country, people often let their dogs run free; and, not infrequently, those dogs were aggressive... and a few of them in particular seemed to take special delight in scaring the bejeebers out of every poor runner who happened to jog past their house.

Now, I got no beef with dogs... I think dogs are great. Not as great as cats, but still great! But I’ll tell you, if you’re out in the boondocks, five or six miles from civilization... and some German shepherd or Rottweiler or even a doggone poodle comes charging into the road barking, and growling, and baring it’s teeth... it can make your whole life pass before your eyes. So, I always made sure to keep careful track of where the aggressive dogs lived; and I scrupulously avoided those roads where I knew I had a chance to become a hot lunch for Spot or Fido. And, in more than twenty years of running, I only got bit twice; both times, oddly enough, right in the middle of town, before I even had a chance to make it out into the country! Go figure!

Anyway, as I said, you always had to keep an eye out for dangerous dogs. But, in all my years of running, over the course of 38,000 miles... not one time, ever, was I threatened or accosted by a... *sheep!* Never. Not once. Zip. Zilch. Nada. And, believe me, the sheep were out there! I’ve spent most of my adult life living and running in farming areas... and plenty of those farms had sheep. In fact, in rural Ohio, they were all over the darn place. But I never had to worry about them... because sheep never chased me; they never put their ears back and “baahed” at me; they never bared their teeth at me... in fact, I’m pretty sure they ever even noticed me at all!

And even around here, I’ve never had any run-ins with sheep. I mean, I’ve patted the Hildreth’s sheep on the head a bunch of times. No problema. Every year for the Live Nativity, we truck in a bunch of sheep, and put them in a little pen out there in the courtyard. I’ve petted them, rubbed them on the head, stuck my hand right inside the pen with them. And they’ve never so much as given me a nibble.

There’s never been an episode of “Naked and Afraid,” where the contestants had to survive three weeks in a forest, surrounded by hungry sheep! Stephen King never wrote a book about some poor guy who died, and then came back to life as the Lamb from Hell. Sheep just aren’t scary... or dangerous! Sheep are docile; sheep are meek; sheep are gentle. Sheep need to be fed, and protected, and shown where they need to go. Sheep aren’t aggressive; they’re passive. Sheep don’t attack; they retreat. Sheep aren’t out there flexing their muscles; they just want somebody to take care of them.

Which is why the relationship between sheep and shepherd has always been such a popular, and powerful, symbol of the relationship between God and His people. In a lot of ways, we humans are quite sheep-like. Very often, we're weak; we're vulnerable; we're prone to wander off the good path, and into a vast constellation of potential dangers. We need guidance, we need protection, we need help. It's a strong human character trait to think that we don't need anyone to assist us with the business of living; but we know that that's usually just a bunch of cockadoodie... most of us need help, and plenty of it, in order to avoid being totally overwhelmed by all the challenges of life.

On the other hand, our Heavenly Father is, in many ways, very shepherd-like. Where we are weak, God is strong; where we are vulnerable, God is almighty; when we're out there discovering countless new ways to fall into sin and goof things up, our Lord is patiently waiting to lead us back to the way of holiness, and virtue, and grace. God is in the business of providing guidance, and protection, and help; along with mercy, forgiveness, and love. So the sheep and shepherd image is very apt; and it describes our relationship with the Lord to a T. And, both of our Scripture lessons this morning make this point beautifully.

In the beloved and familiar lesson from Psalm 23, we're told that the Lord is our shepherd; and that with Him in that role, we shall never be wanting for anything. The Psalm reminds us that our shepherd is always leading us: to green pastures, to still waters, into the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we're told, we need fear no evil; for our great Shepherd is with us right in the thick of it. He comforts us in our times of distress; He gives us nourishment in the presence of our enemies; He anoints us with oil; in His presence we are awash in goodness and mercy. Our shepherd is very good, and very faithful! And what's expected of us sheep? Well, pretty much to just follow the shepherd! Go where we're led, do what we're told, and trust that even when things get dangerous, our shepherd is still on the job!

And then in our gospel lesson from John, the sheep-and-shepherd image is taken still farther; as Jesus, in an extended debate with a group of Pharisees, makes the point that He is the shepherd of the sheep... in much the same way that God is said to be the shepherd in Psalm 23. Jesus is the "Good Shepherd," He proclaims in the section leading up to our lesson; He is the one who cares for the sheep, who protects the sheep from danger; who even lays down His life for the sake of the sheep. Indeed, Jesus is the shepherd who loves the sheep, fully and completely.

And just who are these sheep? Well, as in Psalm 23, the sheep are the people who trust the shepherd and follow Him. In the context of the Gospel of John, the sheep are the people who love Jesus, who listen to Jesus, and who go as Jesus guides them. Jesus told the Pharisees that the sheep are the people who know His voice, and who come running when they hear it.

The Presbyterian New Testament scholar, Kenneth Bailey, tells the story of watching modern-day Middle Eastern shepherds call their own specific sheep, out of a huge herd of sheep made up of a number of different flocks. Each shepherd had his own, unique call; his own "voice" if you will, which only *his* sheep would recognize. So, out of a group of hundreds of sheep, the shepherd, by calling out just a few words, would bring his own, particular sheep out to him. That's the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about in our lesson from John. The people who know Jesus, and love Him, and follow Him... recognize His voice; and that voice, and that voice only, will they follow.

So, these two biblical texts beautifully sum up the relationship between the docile, dependent, needy sheep (like, us!), who *follow*; and the faithful, merciful, loving shepherd (meaning God, or Jesus), who *leads*. All well and good... yes?

Well, most of the time... sure. That's the way it is. The sheep are good-natured and passive... and the shepherd leads with courage and conviction. But, the truth is that, despite everything I said before about how safe, and domesticated, and easy to get along with the sheep usually are; in our own experience, we know that *sometimes*... sometimes the sheep *do* bite!

And I'm not talking about the Hildreth's sheep, or the Live Nativity sheep; I mean that sometimes we *Christian* sheep bite the hand of our Good Shepherd, Jesus... when He tries to lead us somewhere we don't want to go; or when He provides for us in a way that's not to our liking; or when His voice instructs us to live a life more appropriate to a sheep of His flock.

Sometimes we want to re-translate Psalm 23 to say, "*The Lord is my shepherd... that I don't want! At least not right at the moment! He's trying to lead me beside still waters... but I wish He'd just leave me alone until I need His help in one of those valleys of the shadow.*" I'd say that's giving a nip to the hand of our Heavenly Father.

And beyond that, sometimes we're not the ones *doing* the biting... sometimes *we* are bitten, and not by our Good Shepherd, but by some sheep or other who we ourselves are trying to shepherd. Because, we all have some flock or other that we're taking care of, right? Someone or some group that needs us and depends upon us for some reason or other.

Maybe our flock is small... with just one or two sheep who're counting on us; or maybe our flock is large, with many people looking to us for guidance, or wisdom, or courage. Whoever and whatever our flock may be, you and I know that, sooner or later one of the sheep is going to rear up and bite us right on the fanny! And when that happens, it can be devastating, right? It can really hurt; because most of the sheep-bites that we receive, are inflicted by people that we're trying to love. By people we're trying to help. By people to whom we've committed ourselves, and for whom we've made many sacrifices, and with whom we're trying to make our way through all the ups and downs of life.

Crocodiles and hyenas have more powerful bites; cobras and rattlesnakes have bites that are poisonous; but sheep bites are worse than all other bites... because they take a piece of your heart, and your soul, and your will. Sheep bites don't draw blood... but they drain your joy, and your peace of mind, and the sense of purpose that you thought you had as a shepherd. And that's a lot worse than bleeding.

On a cosmic, spiritual level... that's what we do to God, when we chomp down on His loving hand, extended to us in grace. And on a more personal level... it's what we do to each other, when we respond to love and faithfulness with unkindness, or ingratitude, or betrayal, or disrespect.

We all know what that feels like; to be bitten by the sheep... to be treated badly by someone that we care about, and are trying so hard to help. The question of the day though, is, what do we do when it happens? How do we handle it, when one of the sheep in our life stops acting like the sweet little puppet, "Lambchop;" and starts making like Dracula, coming after us with fangs flaring? Well, there's no easy, simple, "one size fits all" answer to this question. But I do have a couple of suggestions... and I'll end with those.

First of all, when we get nipped by one of our sheep, we can do our best to respond in the same way that Jesus responds to us when we try to take a bite out of Him: with grace and forgiveness. Which, as we all know, is easy to *say*... and sometimes very hard to *do*.

Sometimes it takes a long time, and a lot of effort, for us to reach the point where we can genuinely forgive someone who's hurt us badly; but that shouldn't mean that we give up the effort entirely. Working through a long, slow process is *not* the same as just giving up. So we can try our best to be like our Good Shepherd, Jesus, even when the task is frequently three steps forward, and two steps back. Jesus has forgiven us for all of our many bites; a big part of following Jesus is to go and do likewise, to those who've bitten us.

Second, we might try speaking to the sheep that's left its teeth marks in our backside... and point out the pain that such biting and nibbling causes. And I don't mean screaming at the sheep, or telling the sheep to go to... uh, *heck*; I mean calmly explaining to the sheep that, when love and faithfulness are responded to with rudeness or hate... it hurts! This is also often easier said than done, because some of our biting sheep could really care less how we feel; and they have no interest in listening to anything we say. In fact, the very attempt to speak to them might just open the door for further biting.

So, speaking the truth in love to a wayward sheep is a judgment call; maybe it will help... maybe it won't. But we should always be ready to try to help our sheep to understand the damage that's caused by their biting behavior. Jesus frequently tried to help His little flock to understand and appreciate the fallout from their sins and misdemeanors; it seems reasonable that, as followers of Jesus, we should do the same.

Finally, sometimes it happens that a sheep will become so accustomed to biting, that all you can really do is avoid it; and give it a wide berth... as I used to do with aggressive dogs when I'd run out in the country. We all have the responsibility to do our best to be faithful shepherds to the flocks with which we've been entrusted. But if a sheep in that flock simply doesn't want us to *be* its shepherd; and if it insists on responding to our shepherding with constant bites and attacks; then the best thing we can do is to leave that sheep alone... focus our efforts on the rest of the flock that *does* accept us as the shepherd... and leave that biting sheep to its own devices.

Our Good Shepherd, Jesus, did much the same in His own life and ministry; as He never forced anyone to follow Him or to be part of His flock. There are plenty of examples in the gospels of people who heard Jesus teach and preach; and who were invited to become part of His group; but who chose instead to go their own way, and do their own thing. And, though often with a heavy heart... Jesus always allowed them to walk away.

As shepherds, with flocks of various shapes and sizes for which we are responsible, we *are* expected to do our best to meet the needs of our sheep. But we are *not* expected to constantly serve ourselves up on a dinner plate... to be chewed on and consumed by thoughtless sheep who neither care for us, nor respect us. Better to walk away ourselves... than to give in to the temptation to bite back, and make things worse in the process.

So, there's a few strategies to employ when we find ourselves being bitten by our sheep! As we deal with the sheep with which we've been entrusted... let's always remember to keep our eyes on the Good Shepherd who's been entrusted to deal with us! And may we find in Him strength, encouragement, grace, and peace... to take care of all the sheep in our lives!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!