

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

May 15, 2011

It was my uncle's favorite expression...his favorite expression for something that was excellent, and elegant, and impressive. If he found something like that he'd say: *It's a Duesy!*

Have any of you ever heard that phrase before: *It's a Duesy?* Does anyone know where the phrase comes from? Tom Hamilton? A Duesenberg! Exactly right. An automobile. Duesenbergs were first built in 1913 by two German immigrant brothers, Fred and Augie, in Des Moines, Iowa. But they got bought, and Deussenberg moved to Auburn, Indiana and, in 1928, it began building the car that produced the phrase: the Model J. The Model J Duesenberg was all handmade, every last bit of it. It was the biggest, and the fastest, and the fanciest, and the most expensive car in the whole wide world! No wonder the expression developed: *It's a Duesy!*

The Model J gave us that expression but, you know, even when we start to forget about the car, the phrase lives on. It's an anachronism. It's something that's out of place in time. And it's like a lot of things in our conversation, especially for those of us who were accumulating excess age! Our conversation fills up with anachronistic analogies...things that just aren't a part of our contemporary experience anymore...but we still use the analogies to describe the experience of this life. For instance, telephones don't ring anymore...at least most of them don't ring. There's no real bell in these things the way there once was. Telephones squeak, and they chirp, and they sing. I haven't heard a mechanical bell telephone in years. Does anybody still have one in your house? Oh my gosh! I've got to come visit! Well, except for you, phones don't do that anymore. They chirp...they squeak...they sing...and yet we still say, *Your phone is ringing!*

Most of us don't really dial a phone anymore, either, do we? – because our phones don't have dials. You know dials—those round things with ten finger holes in them that you crank. Does anybody still have a dial phone? Oh, no! Well, you can say it, but most of us can't. We can't dial a number. We can key one, but we can't dial one. It's an anachronistic analogy for most of us.

It's just the same with the most beloved anachronistic analogy in all of scripture...the analogy for our relationship to God...the image of the shepherd and the sheep: *The Lord is my shepherd*. Those words—that phrase—stirs up emotions of comfort and safety, of care and of peace that are palpable to us. We can feel it when we hear those words. Those words—*The Lord is my shepherd*—paint for us a romantic scene of bucolic beauty and idyllic serenity. And if you can't imagine it, then you can always look at Warner Sallman's work to see what it means to have the Lord as my shepherd: Jesus with the flock around His feet and the lamb in His arms. *The Lord is my shepherd*: it is a scene of bucolic beauty and idyllic serenity.

This pastoral image...this pastoral analogy for the relationship that exists between our God and us...between God and humanity was once, for us, solidly grounded in common experience; but not so much today. I've already found out that questions are dangerous this morning, but who among you has ever owned sheep? Again! All right, who among you has worked as a shepherd? Finally! So the analogy is not one that lives in our common experience. Yet those who have spent time in the sheepfold and those of you who've owned sheep know that perhaps this anachronistic analogy of the shepherd and the sheep is not necessarily a happy or a comforting image. Because you see, friends, the truth is that sheep are not very smart, and they're not very

able, and they certainly are not very independent. Sheep, as a matter of fact, require constant care. They need food...they need water...and they need to be protected from all manner of predators. Sheep require constant care and, more than that, sheep need constant guidance because, you see, sheep like to stray. In this picture that Warner Sallman painted of Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus has a lamb in his arms, and He's looking that lamb in the eye. The lamb seems taken aback, and I can hear Jesus saying: *What am I going to do with you? You simply won't stay home!*

Sheep like to stray, and the problem with straying sheep is that straying sheep lead their compatriots astray as well. So, because sheep require constant care...because sheep require constant guidance...shepherds must be both vigilant and patient. Shepherds must always be watching out for danger for the sheep, because the sheep wouldn't know danger if they found it. Shepherds must always be guiding the wayward, because sheep don't know where they're going. Shepherds must always be correcting the stubborn, because stubborn is the most (or least!) endearing quality of sheep. Shepherds must be always seeking the lost, because that's what sheep do...they get lost! Shepherds must always be feeding the hungry, because sheep are always hungry. And shepherds must also always be protecting the vulnerable, because sheep have no way to defend themselves. It's a big job. And finally, just to make it even more tough, sheep resist the shepherd's care. Yet, with enough determination and dedication, sheep learn to trust the shepherd and to know the shepherd's voice.

Yes, sheep and the shepherd: that analogy is not very flattering. But it is the analogy that Jesus chose to illustrate and illuminate our relationship to God, and His role in that relationship: the shepherd and his sheep.

The language of the 23rd Psalm is the language of the shepherd and the sheep. It's the language of care, but it's also the language of authority and power. We know it so well that sometimes, perhaps, we really don't listen to the words. The language in that psalm is the language of authority and power.

He makes us to lie down in green pastures.

He leads us beside the still waters. (This isn't a matter of free will.)

He restores our souls.

He leads us in paths of righteousness (even though that may not be where we want to go).

This Shepherd even stays with us when we brush up against death; even when we walk through death's valley, the Shepherd does not abandon us. The Shepherd defends us with the rod, and then the Shepherd disciplines us and pulls us back with the staff because, you know, the crook in the staff is meant to grab a straying sheep by the hind leg and pull it back into the flock. This Shepherd feeds us even when our enemies surround us and anoints us to mark us as His very own. The Shepherd is the One who is our Protector and our Defender. But the Shepherd is also the One who is our Leader and our Guide. This is the One—Protector and Defender, and Leader and Guide—who is the Good Shepherd...the One who is completely committed to the wellbeing of the flock. As Jesus says in John's gospel: ***I know my own and my own know me...*** because I am completely committed to the flock. As Jesus also says: ***I lay down my life for the sheep... because, for me, not even life itself is too high a price to pay to protect and guide the flock.*** And this depth of devotion makes for perfect trust.

What an amazing, incredible thing to say: *I lay down my life for the sheep*. How many of us have ever been so committed to a vocation that even life itself was not too high a price to pay to live it out? *I lay down my life for the sheep*. In this is the surpassing greatness of Christ: *I lay down my life for the sheep*. In this is the full meaning of the cross: *I lay down my life for the sheep*. It is the ultimate demonstration of love that's so pure and devotion that's so sure that says, in Jesus, that everything...everything...everything is for us.

The shepherd: this is Jesus' great model of servant leadership. It's also God's great model of servant leadership. Remember, the greatest king in the history of Israel is the *eighth* son of Jesse: the one who was not groomed to be great but rather was relegated to the pasture to caring for the sheep. Yet where did Samuel find the next king of Israel? It was not in a magnificent house, but in the pasture where David learned what it meant to be a shepherd...the shepherd chosen to be king.

But the palace quickly made David forget the lessons of the flock. And so, instead of tending to the flock, he began to devour the flock and, of course, the most famous illustration of his devouring ways is the way that King David stole for himself the wife of Uriah and made Bathsheba his bride. It was in repentance...in regret...in returning to God from his devouring ways to his shepherd's heart that David found the words that we love so much: *The Lord is my shepherd*.

Shepherd is Jesus' great model of servant leadership, and Peggy and I are well aware that the title *pastor* means exactly that: Pastor means shepherd. It's a high calling, and it's also a humbling expectation to be a shepherd. Jesus teaches us—Jesus our Good Shepherd teaches us—that shepherds have two roles. Jesus had two roles. Jesus was both Savior and Lord. Just so, pastors have two roles. The first is *to protect and to care for* the flock. In the image of the 23rd Psalm, that's the rod: the rod that's the weapon for chasing away all the predators that prey on the flock. That's the first role of pastor: protect and care for the flock.

And the other role is *to lead and to guide*...to *teach* in our tradition...and that role is represented in the 23rd Psalm by the staff: not a weapon of protection, but rather a tool of guidance. To protect and to care for...to lead and to guide: the second is the one that's more difficult and daunting. It has become high fashion in contemporary church conversations to say that being the pastor of a church is like trying to herd cats! Leading and guiding ain't easy! I remember a letter I received a while back that raised some important issues. I responded to the letter with what I thought about the issues, and the answer came back: *I really didn't want an answer. I just wanted to tell you!*

Care, you see, is the tender part. As Jesus says: *I know my own and my own know me*. But guidance can be the tinderbox, yet to guide the flock Jesus says: *I lay down my life for the sheep*.

There is a provocative article written by two college professors from California, and I suppose that, for some, just telling you that they're from California will make you not want to listen. However, this article has a provocative title. It is based on research conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and the title of the article is *Why Evangelicals Hate Jesus*: an interesting title! Let me share a little bit of the article with you.

White Evangelical Christians are the group least likely to support the actual teachings of Jesus (or so the research has led the authors to conclude). Jesus unambiguously preached mercy and forgiveness. And yet Evangelicals are the most supportive of the death penalty, draconian sentencing, punitive punishment over rehabilitation, and the government use of torture. Jesus exhorted humans to be loving, peaceful, and non-violent. And yet Evangelicals are the most supportive of easy-access weaponry, little-to-no regulation of gun ownership, and the violent military invasion of various countries around the world. Jesus was very clear that to be His follower means to give one's money to the poor. And yet Evangelicals are the most opposed to institutional help for the nation's poor -- especially poor children. They reject food stamp programs, subsidies for schools, hospitals and job training -- even though helping out those in need was exactly what Jesus urged humans to do.

Care and protection is easy. Leadership and guidance...not so much! Yet, the greatness of Jesus is that He is our Leader and Guide: the One who lays down His life for us to lead us and guide us into the ways of life everlasting. That means that our response as His sheep is to follow Him and live for Him. The blessings of Jesus' shepherd care are not just giving us what we want, but leading us where we need to go.

And old friend called me last week; someone I've known all my life. My friend has never had a place for faith in his life. The church for his family was a Christmas and Easter event, and nothing more. In our conversation, he described a whole series of coincidences of events that have been coming into his life. And, as he described them, he said: ***I need your help! This is your job!*** Then he asked: ***Is God working on me? And if God is, what shall I do?*** Well, we are continuing the conversation, but my immediate answer to him was: ***You really do need to let the Good Shepherd love you and lead.***

There's another old phrase that lives in our conversation. That phrase is: ***by hook or by crook.*** When we hear that, I think we know what it means. What does it mean? ***By hook or by crook*** means what? It means, ***whatever it takes.*** We'll get it done ***by hook or by crook.*** Well you know what the hook and the crook are, don't you? They're just two other names for the shepherd's staff. Indeed, the shepherd's staff is the origin of the phrase and it means that God, our Good Shepherd, will do whatever it takes to save us, and to guide us, and to lead us home.

We know the 23rd Psalm by heart because it stirs our hearts. Yet, friends, everything we need to know from that psalm is contained in the first phrase: ***The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want!*** Yes, Jesus is our Good Shepherd. And He's a Duesy! Amen.

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