

Bummer Lambs and Lost Sheep

May 15, 2022

Bummer Lambs

It takes a lot to capture my spiritual imagination. My guess is that's largely because so much of my life and reflection is steeped in religion and spirituality and theology and faith.

So, imagine my surprise when I came across two reflections on sheep and the Good Shepherd that I found so compelling that I wanted to share them with you almost whole cloth. My surprise was even stronger because the first piece was written by Sheila Walsh, a former co-host of the 700 Club, and the second by a robotics researcher at the U.S. Naval Laboratories – neither source one that would usually be at the top of what I would expect to pass on to you. But, as the old saying goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day.

Sometimes useful wisdom comes from unlikely sources. (I said that I'd like to share these two pieces almost whole cloth; both are redacted by me for the purposes of inclusivity.)

First, a reflection on “Bummer Lambs” by Sheila Walsh, the former co-host of the 700 Club, out of her book, “Loved Back to Life”:

Every once in a while, a ewe will give birth to a lamb and reject it. There are many reasons she may do this. If the lamb is returned to the ewe, the mother may even kick the poor animal away. Once a ewe rejects one of her lambs, she will rarely change her mind.

These little lambs will hang their heads so low that it looks like something is wrong with their necks. Their spirit is broken. These lambs are called “bummer lambs.” Unless the shepherd intervenes, that lamb will die, rejected and alone.

So, do you know what the shepherd does? They take that rejected little one into their home, hand-feed it and keep it warm by the fire. They will wrap it up with blankets and hold it to their chest so the bummer can hear their heartbeat. Once the lamb is strong enough, the shepherd will place it back in the field with the rest of the flock.

What's fascinating is that the sheep never forgets how the shepherd cared for it when it was rejected. When the shepherd calls for the flock, guess who runs out first? That is right, the bummer sheep. The sheep that has been nurtured so deeply in the face of adversity knows the shepherd's voice intimately. It is not that the bummer lamb is loved more, it just knows intimately the one who loves it. It's not that it is loved more, it just believes it because it has experienced that love one on one.

So many of us are bummer lambs or feel like we're bummer lambs at different stages in our lives: rejected and broken. But the good Shepherd cares for our every need and holds us so close we can hear their heartbeat.

Walsh concludes her reflection by saying, “We may be broken, but we are deeply loved by the Shepherd.”

While she ties up the reflection by looking at the brokenness of the bummer lamb, my mind and spirit fixate on the intimacy between the bummer lamb and the shepherd. They spend a substantial amount of time together, and it creates a bond. There’s a depth of relationship between the bummer lamb and the shepherd, because they’ve put the time in.

And so, my biggest takeaway here is that taking time with God, time for prayer and study and reflection and service, ultimately leads to an intimacy with God that is palpable. It leads to recognizing God’s voice when we hear it.

I’m often asked how to discern what is Godly and what is not, whether in regard to different churches’ teachings, or filtering through scriptural interpretation, or even as we live our faith in a secular society. My best wisdom, which I’ve shared here before, is to ask yourself what you know, in the core of your being, is at the center of who Jesus was and what he taught: mercy, love, healing, forgiveness, compassion, inclusion, justice, the importance of the spirit of the law over the letter of the law, what the church calls the “preferential option for the poor,” which means, in short, that God has a special place in God’s heart for those who are struggling, and therefore we need to as well. Once you’ve gathered this list of Jesus’ core values, look at any church teaching, any scriptural interpretation, through these values as a lens. Use the core of who Jesus was as your lens, and you have a pretty good chance of being on track. In short, use what you learned of the shepherd in those intimate times of care, and you’ll recognize God’s voice later on.

Lost Sheep

The second piece that I’m sharing today comes from almost as unlikely a source to be shared from my pulpit: a fellow by the name of Carl Henshaw, who is a robotics researcher with the U.S. Naval Laboratory in Maryland:

Henshaw writes:

We found a lamb hiding under a bank of the creek that runs along the back of our property this morning. This is the near bank, which means she could not be seen from our side of the creek – we had to wade the creek or jump the bank to see her. She was not making a sound, and it took some careful counting to realize she was missing, and some careful searching to find her.

The scene we encountered this morning included all the sheep except four being right where they should be, in the barnyard. But the electric fence at the back of the pasture was lying on the ground and had wool all over it. The hay feeder had been flipped upside down, and the water in the trough was all muddy. Someone had been committing some mischief.

And then this ewe lamb was hiding from us. She was with another, older ewe, who was standing in the brush on the far side of the creek, barely visible.

You would be excused if you thought that these sheep were up to no good. The evidence is all there. Something had destroyed the fence, and these two ewes had made a series of bad decisions that culminated in them leaving the flock and ending up in the creek in the rain. Clearly, these two are bad news.

But that's only because you don't know what actually happened. What actually happened is that we have a new 18-month-old sheepdog who will be a good dog someday, but today he was a very bad dog. We left him in the backyard unsupervised for two hours early this morning. Except he didn't stay in the backyard; he went through a hole in the fence, showing our other two dogs how to follow, and they entertained themselves by running the sheep. The first we noticed was when we went to let the dogs in and discovered they were missing. Then we saw a ewe lying in the far corner of the pasture. The dogs had run her to death. That's what led to us counting the sheep in the barnyard; we had to know whether there were any more sheep missing.

You may know the parable of the lost sheep. In it, Jesus tells of a shepherd who notices that one out of one hundred sheep is missing, and searches for it until it is found and returned to the flock. If we are being particularly insightful, we note that sheep aren't simply misplaced; they end up where they are by walking, so – we say – this lost sheep had wandered away from the flock, and therefore we should diligently seek out and help those who have gotten to where they are through their own poor decisions.

This may be the case, but in my experience of shepherding, it's probably wrong.

Sheep don't wander away from the flock. It isn't in their nature. A sheep who has left the flock left because it was driven away. It was terrified and did not know where to look for safety, so it ran. And the reason it was terrified is usually due to poor shepherding – the shepherd has led the flock to a pasture where there are predators or has left it out in a storm. Or the shepherd has neglected that hole in the fence and left unsupervised a young, inexperienced sheepdog, who is supposed to be a helper but has discovered that terrorizing sheep is darned fun. And then that shepherd went back to bed.

In other words, very often the person we are to seek out is not “lost” and is not missing because he or she made poor decisions. They left because we drove them away. They did not look or talk or think or love like we do, and we did not create spaces where they felt safe. We looked the other way when they weren't admitted to school because they weren't a “good fit,” or they were given a hard time because they were a woman in a man's job or a man in a woman's job. We did not invite them into our neighborhoods, or our clubs, or our churches. When they were harassed by police, we told ourselves that it was their fault for being where they were, behaving how they behaved. If they would just make different choices, they could help themselves.

This lamb was hiding from a predator who terrified her and had killed one of her sisters, and that was not her fault. It was ours.

Henshaw concludes, “If you would seek the lost sheep, first admit that you may be part of the reason they aren't already here.”

This reflection put a whole new spin on the Parable of the Lost Sheep for me, a spin that I think can be powerfully instructive for those of us trying to live Christ's ways. So much of society blames the lost sheep: take the young man who was the reason for the latest JOSHUA prayer service I led, who was killed by gunfire a few days ago. I'm sure there are people who are thinking that "this is what happens when THOSE people live THAT WAY." Or even take the student loan forgiveness debate. So many are oversimplifying the complexity of the issue by saying, "They got themselves into it. They shouldn't have taken out the loan if they couldn't repay it." Or in regard to abortion, I'm hearing so many say, "Well just don't get pregnant," which completely misses the point.

So often, we blame the sheep for being lost. What I love about the reflection from Henshaw is that, in such a graphic and yet contemporary way, he reminds us that the Bible doesn't blame the lost sheep, and neither should we. If we are to live the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we need to seek that which is lost, while at the same time taking a long hard look as to how those sheep got lost in the first place.

Conclusion

And so this week, friends, my prayer for all of us is that as Bummer Lambs, we will spend intimate time with the shepherd, so that we will have that depth of relationship to draw on, and that as shepherds, we will seek out those who have gotten lost, without judgment, without blame, simply because they are beloved and precious and the flock isn't complete without them.

May it be so. Alleluia, and amen.

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