

April 19, 2015  
Falcon Heights Church, UCC  
Falcon Heights, MN  
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Third Sunday in Easter  
Psalm 23  
John 10:11-18

## THIS GOOD SHEPHERD

We heard a lot about sheep and shepherds in our scripture readings just now. In the Psalm reading, God is compared to a shepherd who watches over us, leads us to places of rest and food. In the Gospel of John piece, Jesus is concluding an argument with some Jerusalem religious leaders about his healing of a blind person on the Sabbath. Jesus speaks of himself as a good shepherd, and how his sheep know his voice. He is the protector for the sheep, like the gate that protects them at night from wild animals.

We might assume that these are familiar and cozy metaphors for the caring nature of both God and Jesus. But besides maybe seeing sheep at the State Fair, how many of us have spent much time around sheep and their shepherds? I know I haven't. And how do you like being compared to a sheep? I'm not sure how I feel about that myself. Aren't sheep sort of dumb, always wandering off and getting lost? To make things even more confusing, church members often assume that their pastors are supposed lead their churches like shepherds. The word pastor comes from the word pasture, pastoral. Lead your flock to still waters and green pastures, Anne! Always be ready to save the sheep; lay down your life for your sheep! I must admit that this sounds hard and exhausting. I'm not sure, as your pastor, that I am willing to do that! Is this what is expected of a pastor these days? Sheep, shepherds. God and Jesus. Let's see if we can make some sense out of this.

First of all, can we seriously compare people to sheep? How helpful is this? Most of us think of sheep are unruly and dumb. But that might not be the whole story. In Jesus' time, and thousands of years before that, sheep were important for wool, meat and milk. Sheep apparently like to hang out together, which made it easier for humans to herd them. Their eyes are on top of their heads and they walk with a funny zigzag that lets them see behind them all the time. Watching out for a wolf! They have four stomachs; that means they can digest all kinds of stuff we could never eat, like grass and weeds. At night they would be all penned up with other flocks, but they were smart enough to know their master's voice, and would come to the particular shepherd in the morning to head out to pasture together. All considered, perhaps it is not a bad thing to be a sheep. Maybe it's okay to be compared to a sheep.

But am I supposed to be your shepherd? When your yet-to-be-formed Pastoral Search Committee finds a new called pastor, will that person be expected to be your new shepherd? I mentioned in our weekly email, the TAB,

this last Thursday that much church conflict is focused on the expectations of the congregation of their pastor. Problems arise when those expectations are not identified and discussed. Or when the expectations are clear but not met. In the months to come, I will be inviting us to explore your expectations of clergy leadership in today's church. We may notice there are generational differences among us in these shifting expectations. It will be good to get clear about this before a Pastoral Search Committee is formed and empowered to select a new pastor for this church.

Let's think some about this shepherd image. Is your pastor supposed to be a good shepherd among you? Leading, protecting, saving? I used to think so myself, but then I heard this story about a certain sheepdog named Esau. This story has become well known in churches around the country, and was even shared in our Women's Fellowship group devotional a few months ago. It's worth repeating, because it may help us make sense out of how we can work together better in the church. Pastor and people.

Now, Esau's human was the Rev. M. Craig Barnes, a longtime Presbyterian Church pastor, until he recently became president of Princeton Seminary. Esau is actually a bearded collie, a type of Scottish sheepdog. Now Pastor Craig knew his Bible, and he used to think that he too was called to be a shepherd of his church flock. But one day he started paying closer attention to his sheepdog, Esau. He started noticing a few things.

He observed that every day on their morning walks, Esau would sniff all around and happily wag his tail. Cloudy or sunny day, it didn't matter. Same thing. Happy to be alive! "Hmmm," thought Pastor Craig, "I wonder if I'm supposed to be the one who is to keep paying attention to the goodness all around us and remind people about it. God's grace is always in the air! This is part of my job." As I think about my own work among you, I realize this may be part of why I invite us to share some joys and delights before starting each church meeting.

Then, when Pastor Craig and his family would go to the beach, Esau would try to herd the birds. Not by running straight at them, in a head-on confrontation, but by coming in slant. "Ahhh," thought Pastor Craig, "I might try that more often with my congregation." Not by confronting issues or changes straight on, but more subtly, on a slant. So, I shouldn't demand that you all stop arguing about Sanctuary furniture. It's my role to suggest that we have some respectful conversation about what we do in worship, its purpose, and how different kinds of furniture like pews, altar, Communion table, pulpit help us in our worship.

Pastor Craig also noticed that Esau would not go to bed until everyone in the house came upstairs to their bedrooms. The sheepdog stays awake until everyone is gathered in. I've thought about that whenever I'm the last one out of

the building, locking the door, watching you all get in your cars in the dark following a night meeting.

I was also intrigued by what Pastor Craig learned with Esau at the dog park. Pastor Craig finally realized that the dog park was not really fun for Esau, because Esau kept trying to round up the other dogs. “Yes,” thought Pastor Craig, “my work in ministry is not always fun and games. Pastors need to worry about the order and well-being of the whole community. My delight is not to be in chasing Frisbees” but “in helping others gather around the Good Shepherd.” I think this has to do with ministerial boundaries and ethics. I am your pastor not in order to get my needs met, but to be of service. We should all be able to have some fun in doing this. But. Most cases of pastoral misconduct begin with a clergyperson seeking to get his or her emotional needs, friendship and support needs met by someone or a group in the congregation.

At this point in his pondering, Pastor Craig started to wonder: “Maybe I’m supposed to be more like a sheepdog than the shepherd.” He even went to watch some other border collies at some sheep-herding trials. Sheepdogs practice herding the sheep, as guided by the shepherd. He noticed how the dogs didn’t bark much or make a lot of fuss. The sheepdogs would actually spend quite a bit of time sitting still and looking at the shepherd. “These dogs are faithful agents of another mind,” Rev. Craig thought to himself. “Always obedient to the master’s, the shepherd’s directive will.” He realized that the shepherd was the center of the sheepdog’s life, not the sheep. And the only way the sheepdog keeps up this good herding work is because it frequently sits down, is very still and intently watches the master, the shepherd. Not only that, but the sheepdog rests when the day is done. “That’s it,” Pastor Craig admitted to himself. “My job as a pastor is to nudge the sheep towards the only savior of the flock! Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lays down HIS life for his sheep.”

I have found this very helpful as I think about my role as pastor. I am not to be your shepherd. I am to be like a good sheepdog. I am to sit still and watch and listen to the master shepherd, Jesus. It is my job to pay attention to Jesus’ teachings, listen to his Spirit speak in my heart. Can you, will you, hold me accountable to that? Ask me how I am doing in paying attention to the master shepherd in my own life.

I realize I am also to do all this without barking or fussing or ostentatious displays of authority. I am to try to lovingly nip at all of your heels. I am to gently, firmly herd you back to the Good Shepherd. Am I barking or fussing or throwing my weight around too much as pastor? I need the feedback!

Perhaps most of all, I am grateful to Pastor Craig for reminding me that I too am just one of God’s creatures. I am an animal in this analogy, just like each of you. I’m just a dog. I don’t save anyone; that’s up to God.

We are all learning to understand what the Shepherd wants us to do with our precious lives. Sheep and sheepdog, working together: not a bad metaphor for church. All following the one who is both Good Shepherd and Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Note: Inspiration for the “pastor as sheepdog” image is from an article by M. Craig Barnes, “The Good Sheepdog,” *Christian Century*, February 2, 2012.