

*Tuned to the Shepherd*

John 10:22-30; Psalm 23

Whitefish UMC

June 20, 2010—Father's Day

- † Although I don't know how, I am fairly certain that Sammy the lamb knows Skye the sheep dog's voice (and smell). And Skye knows Sammy's voice (and smell), too. And that's how God made border collies and lambs, refined in the evolutionary soup of the ages.
- † Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life..." (John 10:27-28) One day a teen-aged boy returned from church and said to his father, "We hear a lot of preaching at church about what the Bible says we should and shouldn't do, but no one tells us what that looks like in our world. How do we actually do what the Bible says?"
- † Doesn't that make you wonder, if Jesus says believers will hear his voice and follow him, how that exactly is to happen in this crazy world of ours? One of the most important things we can do for our children, whether we are fathers who are celebrated today, mothers, or preachers and teachers, is to help them make good choices.
- † It is an awesome responsibility, and we need help. We try to be good shepherds of our children, of each other, but we often don't have the skill of Skye in keeping track or in herding them in the right direction.
- † Today is Father's Day, and so it is appropriate to begin with a humorous Father's Day story. You may have heard about the mother who was

laboring in the kitchen, preparing a special meal for supper. Her little boy was giving her fits—running in and out of the kitchen and ignoring his mother’s threats and warnings.

- † When he accidentally knocked a perfectly prepared dish off the table, only to have it devoured by the family dog, his mother grabbed a broom and started after him. When he crawled under the house, she decided to let her husband take care of the boy. When her husband arrived home from work, she yelled, “Go discipline your son!” So the father crawled under the house looking around, until he saw two bright eyes peering around a pillar, and heard a small voice say, “Dad, is she after you, too?”
- † The most common image that Jesus used in describing God was that of “Father.” It makes me wonder about Jesus’ earthly father, Joseph. Of course we don’t hear much about him after the birth narratives, and scholars speculate that he may have been older than Mary, the mother of Jesus, and so died well before she did. By the time Jesus began his ministry, Joseph was probably gone.
- † Yet his impact on Jesus must have been significant in his early years, about which we know almost nothing. After a boy reached twelve years old or so, it was his father’s job to teach him the scriptures and interpretation. Jesus had a very keen knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, and Joseph must have taught him well.
- † Joseph, then, was probably an influential role model for Jesus. Would he have called God “Father” so often if Joseph had failed him? It’s hard to know. Perhaps Jesus missed Joseph sorely, and so transferred his filial attachment to God. Or perhaps Jesus longed for a different kind of Father—one who loved him unconditionally and welcomed him back when he stumbled.

- † A good father, as portrayed in the gospels, is one who doesn't just wait inside the manor house for you to come crawling back home, but who, throwing dignity to the winds, runs down the path to meet you with tears on his face. A good father is one who comes to where you are lying in the ditch, beaten up by life, and picks you up, binds your wounds, and loves you into healing.
- † Maybe you have never known a father like that. Maybe you have. Will Willimon tells a story of a woman who worked in a drug and alcohol rehab center. She described her work to him. "We have all incoming residents fill out a questionnaire when they are admitted. One of the questions is 'Describe your home life growing up in a brief paragraph.'"
  - † Ninety percent of them start with these words: 'I was raised in a good Christian home.' She said, "It's enough to turn you against a good Christian home." As Alyce McKenzie says, Jesus began his prayer with "Father," not because he wanted people to equate God with their human fathers.
  - † God knows and we know human parents can hurt as well as heal. Jesus prayed, "Our Father" realizing that God's identity and purposes exceed our ability to understand or articulate them. But he also knew that we human beings, with our limited knowledge, need to make comparisons between God and what we know.
  - † We know about family relationships, at least what they could be. The prophet Isaiah portrays God as a mother, picking up her young and carrying them when they are tired. Jesus himself depicts God as a mother hen shielding her people under her wings.
  - † When Jesus prayed what we now call "The Lord's Prayer," He prayed, "Father, hallowed by your name." For God is honorable. "Your Kingdom come," for God is accessible. "Give us this day our daily bread," for God is

dependable. “Forgive us our trespasses,” for God is merciful. This is the God to whom Jesus prayed and taught us to pray.

- † A good shepherd. A father. A mother. But even the best of shepherds and parents can’t keep their sheep from straying, their children from making bad decisions that lead to pain and even death. Innocent sheep and children are lost, and it hurts us deeply. Thornton Wilder dealt with this hard truth in The Bridge of San Luis Rey. A village has been struck with horrible pestilence. Brother Juniper seeks to understand the meaning, if any, of this tragedy.
- † He draws up a chart of the characteristics of fifteen victims and fifteen survivors, rating them for such qualities as goodness, faithfulness, and usefulness. When he adds up the total for the victims and the survivors, his figures show that the dead were five times more worth saving than those who lived through the pestilence. And Brother Juniper is greatly troubled. And so are we.
- † There are injustice and suffering in this world, along with unspeakable joy. And yet the gospels say that God is like a good shepherd with a flock of 100 sheep. If even one of them is lost, God seeks us, finds us, and stays with us—no matter what. God sees us with the eyes of love beyond anything that we can imagine. And when suffering and struggle threaten to overcome us, God reminds us, through the promise of Easter, that there is new life and new hope beyond anything we can imagine.
- † In Marjorie Rawlings beautiful novel, The Yearling, set in rural Florida, there is a scene in which friends and family gather around the grave of a little disabled boy named Fodderwing. With no official preacher present, one of the men of the community offered up this moving prayer:

- † “Almighty God, it ain’t right for us to say what is right. But if we had been making this boy we would never have made him with his back bent and his legs crooked. We would have made him straight and tall like his brothers. But somehow you made it up to him. You gave him a way with critters. It comforts us to know that he is in a place where his being bent doesn’t matter no more. We would like to think that you have taken that bent back and those crooked legs and straightened them out.
- † And almighty God, if it ain’t asking too much, we pray you will give him some critters to play with—maybe a few redbirds and a squirrel or two. Thy will be done. Amen.” We don’t know what heaven is like, but because God is honorable, accessible, dependable, and merciful, and is love itself, we know that God will celebrate with us when we return to the fold.
- † We all, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, wish we could always act as faithfully as the Good Shepherd. But more often, we act more like the sheep. I love this passage from Terry Pratchett’s young adult novel, Wee Free Men. Nine year old Tiffany Aching reflects: “She thought of Granny Aching’s light, weaving slowly across the downs, on freezing sparkly nights or in storms like a raging war, saving lambs from the creeping frost or rams from the precipice.
- † She froze and struggled and tramped through the night for idiot sheep that never said thank-you and would be just as stupid tomorrow, and get into the same trouble again. And she did it because not doing it was unthinkable.”
- † That’s the kind of Good Shepherd, the kind of Father, the kind of parent that God is like. The paradox is this: although we are often more like sheep, God sees us as potential good shepherds, fathers, mothers, with eyes full of love and wisdom. God calls us to tune our hearts and our eyes and our ears

to the voice of the Shepherd. And to become a Good Shepherd for one another.

† There is a beautiful hymn by Isaac Watts that somehow didn't make it into our hymnal. It was sung at the National Cathedral during the ecumenical prayer service following September 11<sup>th</sup>. Its words, in part, are:

† *My shepherd will supply my need;  
Jehovah is his name;  
In pastures fresh he makes me feed,  
Beside the living stream.  
He brings my wandering spirit back  
When I forsake his ways,  
And leads me for his mercy's sake,  
In paths of truth and grace.*

*The sure provisions of my God  
Attend me all my days;  
Oh may thy house be my abode,  
And all my work be praise.  
There would I find a settled rest,  
While others go and come;  
No more a stranger, nor a guest,  
But like a child at home.*

† Let this be our prayer, this Father's Day and always. Amen.

Sources:

Rev. Elizabeth Mitchell Clement, "Notice, Named, and Nurtured," <http://day1.org>

Terry Pratchett, Wee Free Men.

King Duncan, “The Love of a Father,” <http://www.esermons.com>

Alyce McKenzie, “The Friend at Midnight: A Father’s Day Sermon,”  
<http://www.patheos.com>