

“The Worthy Shepherd”
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John 10:1-10

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Location, location, location--it makes all the difference. As we look at today's text, we must locate it in the time and place in which it first meant something. To John's struggling young church, besieged by those intent on diminishing Jesus. This text was a strong affirmation of God's presence in this Jesus in whom they'd staked their all. There were other powerful religious leaders who, in Jesus' physical absence, asserted themselves. They wished to share in the influence that Jesus had over the lives of the people. Against these competing philosophies and ideologies, John's gospel states the claim for Jesus as the worthy shepherd. Just what makes Jesus a shepherd worthy of being followed?

The Palestinian shepherd was part of a shepherd culture that would have been an easy illustration to the hearers of this text. One commentary said that sheep were more likely to be raised for their wool versus a quick kill for meat, and so the shepherd had time to develop a personal relationship with the sheep. Sheep had names. They knew the voice of their shepherd and could distinguish his voice from other shepherds. One writer told the story of two shepherds whose herds stayed together intermingled over night. The next morning the herd was easily divided as each responded to the voice of their shepherds. From Psalm 23 we are familiar with the tools the shepherd used to maintain the herds safety--rod, staff, and the fact that the shepherd led by going ahead first inspiring confidence in the sheep to follow. A worthy shepherd is also a worthy leader.

Volumes have been written and much research has been done about leadership. People have different ideas of what good and effective leadership looks like. I've always been amused at some presuppositions about leadership, especially that leaders are somehow higher in rank. The clergy sometimes the need to use labels to distinguish how important a leader is, such as having the title "senior pastor" even when there's no other pastor on staff. In my mind, the best leaders are not those with specific titles or unique responsibilities, but those who fulfill their call and inspire others to do the same. The best leaders are not dictators who instill fear; they are not even benevolent dictators who dictate through the kindest of manipulation. The best leaders lead through relationship and it is not the relationship of leader to object but more of what is called the "I-Thou" relationships versus "I-it." True leadership inspires because of the worthiness and merit of the task proposed. Good leaders lead by example and don't ask others to sacrifice in ways they are not willing to follow themselves.

Leadership must be based on trust or else the system of relationships is in constant anxiety. Good leaders don't sneak around like thieves and bandits. A true leader is willing to say "I'm sorry," to change course, to ask for good advice. I believe true leaders learn while leading (a title of a good book I once read). A really good leader is secure enough in her/himself that they don't have to know it all. Good leaders have confidence in team work. About ten years ago our conference went to a team ministry model of leadership, and the conference's leadership language from that point forward reflected that model, because words are important.

One of the most striking elements of leadership and shepherding is how power is used to bring about certain ends. The worthy shepherd calls, leads, prods, protects, supports, may even carry the sheep on their shoulders. Jesus used similar forms of power; today it's called "soft power." The church has sometimes failed to notice the style of power used by Jesus. His power was based on truth, wisdom, education, care in forms of healing and kindness, and a willingness to go to the cross rather than acquiesce to evil. Jesus never asks anything of us that he was not

willing himself to do. His actions and his words matched and they were consistent. Therefore, he merited trust.

I am no longer surprised to see people believe in leaders for all the wrong reasons; I've seen it happen too many times. Even the clergy must sometimes be included in the category of the false shepherd. Pastors (the word itself is Latin for sheep) have the great privilege of sharing some of life's most sacred intimacies, but simply because we marry, bury, counsel, and are present in times of crisis, we must be held accountable and not be allowed leeway to cross boundaries inappropriately. People who love one another must have loving actions consistent with their words.

Well, I want to end on a lighter note by talking about one of my all time favorite movies--BABE. Babe is a pig who thinks he's a sheepdog. He's orphaned and since the sheepdog befriends him, he adopts her as his mom and wants to do what she does which is to help the farmer herd sheep. This movie offers too many lessons in leadership and relationships to fully name them, but I do want to focus on a just a few.

Babe is told by Fly, the sheepdog, that he must let those stupid sheep know who is in charge by barking, growling, and if necessary even biting. But that doesn't work for Babe. What does work is simple conversation--asking, saying please, and explaining the necessity of the request. Babe develops an I-thou relationship with the sheep, and it works!

The farmer is so impressed with his sheep-pig that he decides to enter Babe in a sheepdog contest in which Babe will be required to corral the sheep quickly and efficiently. When Babe appears as the only NON-DOG contestant, he and the humble farmer are ridiculed. But the big problem is that although the sheep on the farm know Babe's voice, the sheep in the contest do not. Therefore, they do not respond to the voice of the sheep-pig. Fortunately, with the help of the sheepdogs, Babe is given the secret code so that these unfamiliar sheep may know him as a worthy shepherd. They follow his lead, his kind direction, impeccably, and Babe the sheep-pig receives a perfect score. Shepherding and leadership is achieved through good relationships.

Well, it's a great film which I highly recommend. I've said this before, but just in case you haven't heard me, the way the church binds itself together in faithfulness--is through relationship to one another and to God. Relationships require a lot from us. They don't require us to be perfect but they do require that we put a lot of faith and effort in the lives of those with whom we journey, with those we love, and those who will come after us. May we be worthy shepherds, following the lead of Jesus, whose voice we recognize as we respond to his faithfulness and love all the days of our life.