Sunday, April 20, 1997
SHEPHERDS, SHEEP AND GEESE
John 10:11-18

If you're like me, you've heard sermons on Jesus as the Good Shepherd and God as a shepherd. Most of us are familiar with the 23rd Psalm, which begins, "The Lord is my shepherd."

For some reason, it's comforting to think of God as a shepherd, even though most of us today have never seen or met a shepherd, and we probably don't often think of ourselves as sheep. It's a word-picture from another time and culture.

In spite of it being an ancient metaphor, pastors of churches are sometimes described as "shepherds." We are even accused of "sheep stealing" if a member from another congregation transfers his or her membership to this one.

I saw a cartoon that showed a picture of the inside of a church, and the pews were filled with sheep. One was saying to another, "We thought we were going to get a shepherd, and all we got was a lousy sheepdog," and in the cartoon, the pulpit was occupied by a shaggy, unpleasant-looking dog.

Even the business world has borrowed the metaphor of "shepherd" as one of its models for a leader. There are workshops, weekend retreats, and all kinds of books that aim to educate us in the skills of leadership development — how to lead, how to be a shepherd. Maybe that's because some of the most heroic leaders in the Old Testament stories were shepherds before they became leaders of people. Moses was a shepherd. David, who became the first king of Israel, was a shepherd.

At the same time, there are few courses, workshops, or books on how to be sheep. How many times have you been offered the opportunity to participate in a seminar on how to be a good follower? The chances are that attendance at such a seminar would be pretty low. Nobody dreams big dreams about being a follower. Yet that's what those of us who call ourselves Christians are supposed to be — followers. In the New Testament, those who accepted the invitation of Jesus to "follow him" were called "Followers of the Way."

The early church adopted the metaphor of sheep and shepherds, even to the extent of seeing the pastor of a congregation as a shepherd, as I mentioned earlier. The English word "Pastor" is nothing other than the Latin word for shepherd.

But we shouldn't stretch the metaphor too far. In fact, I think pastors are to be both shepherds and sheep — that is, we are called to be leaders, but also followers. Church members are also meant to be both leaders and followers. And that's true in the world outside the church. Sometimes we need to be leaders, and at other times, followers.

I know a man who does not like the 23rd Psalm. This man has success written all over him. He's in his mid-fifties, wears a Rolex watch and a big diamond ring. He is strong, blunt, self-confident, and self-reliant. If something doesn't suit him, he lets you know. He is accustomed to getting his way. He gives orders; others follow. He is not a sheep. And he's sure that he doesn't need a shepherd.

And he's not the exception. It's difficult for most of us to think of ourselves as sheep. We would like to believe that we are completely self-reliant, able to fend for ourselves. It's hard for us to admit that we need a shepherd, even if that shepherd is God. As one of my friends used to say, "Of course, religion is a crutch, but who says you don't limp?"

There come those times in each person's life when you find yourself on unfamiliar ground, lost, and unable to find your way. Sooner or later, you discover that you need a shepherd. Things that once seemed so important no longer matter. Sources of strength, security, and meaning seem empty and dry.

To some, this happens in an instant because of an accident or some other sudden crisis. To others, it comes gradually. It comes with time, with age, with experience. You become aware that life is not as neat and orderly as you once thought it was. You realize that life is difficult, more complex, and the world more confusing and frightening than it once seemed. You begin to sense that you are more vulnerable than you ever dreamed you could be. Suddenly, the future does not seem as secure and predictable. The landscape seems strange, different, and you find yourself trying to remember what it felt like when you had everything figured out, when you were the shepherd — and now you know you are also a sheep and need a shepherd.

It's not easy to admit you need a shepherd, someone you can follow and trust. That's what the first three steps in A.A. are all about:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
Even when you are not facing a crisis in your life, there are times when you are a sheep and other times a shepherd. Your life is not all leading or all following. There's a time for leading and a time for following, and there's an advantage to working with others in an organized fashion, which implies leading and following.

Here's an illustration from another species of living creatures that has been of great help to me. In 1983, a minister colleague of mine who is now retired wrote a little book with the title High Flying Geese, and the subtitle, "Unexpected Reflections on the Church and Its Ministry."

Using research from two scientists associated with the California Institute of Technology, which described a detailed study of birds in flight, especially geese, he discovered two important facts which apply to leading and following, not only with birds or with shepherds and sheep but with human beings as well.

The first is this: formation flight of birds improves aerodynamic efficiency. Geese flying in the familiar "V" formation improve their speed and efficiency by 70%, as compared with a lone bird or with birds flying together at random. To put it another way, geese flying in formation — that is, in an organized pattern with a leader — have a seventy percent advantage over single geese seeking to do their own thing.

An individual Christian might say, "I have no use for the church, but I try to live by the teachings of Christ," or "There are so many hypocrites in the church, I can't worship with them." So, it's off to the mountains or a lake for a private religious experience. This isn't meant to discount the need for being alone with God at times. But it's to remind us that there is awesome power when two or three or more are gathered together in God's name.

The second fact about birds in flight, especially geese, and which relates to being both a shepherd and a sheep, leading and following, is this: a “V” formation is required to more equally distribute the drag-saving, and contrary to what some believe, the lead bird does not necessarily have the most strenuous position. This might come as a surprise to us ordinary bird watchers, who assume that the lead bird is the pioneer, breaking the current and providing an easier flight for those who follow behind, much like a bicyclist drafting behind another.

The benefit of the “V” formation is shared by all its members, including the lead bird. He or she is not a lonely martyr out there in front receiving all the strong countercurrents. The lead bird receives a tremendous “upwash” created by the whole formation.

This is especially true in church leadership. When members of a congregation pray regularly for the church and its ministers, it creates a sense of support. There is a deep sense in which all of us are ministers, and in the work of the church, the congregation members are assistant ministers. In your work in the world, you become ministers, and those of us who are ministers in the church are your assistants.

We are ministers to one another. This principle is sometimes called “the priesthood of all believers.” In congregations where the elements of Holy Communion are passed among the pews by members, this practice is a powerful reminder that we are all ministers to one another.

What I’ve said here about the church is true for many other organizations and businesses.

Let’s return to our geese metaphor for one more point. The research on geese in flight tells us that those in the formation behind the leader often make a honking sound. This honking from behind is not for complaint but for encouragement.

In most organizations, including churches, there is often honking from behind that is not for encouragement but for complaint. “Why don’t we sing the old hymns?” “Why can’t we do things the way we used to?”

Geese in flight, however, honk to keep in touch with each other, to encourage one another in flight, and to alert one another to danger. By changes in modulation, pitch, and frequency, they have a vocal network of mutuality and encouragement.

The church requires such honking because it, like migrating geese, is a community in flight. We are on a journey through life together and need the help and encouragement of each other. We are not only people of the way but people on the way.

In our life in the church and outside it, you and I are both shepherd and sheep. At times, we are the lead goose, and at other times, we are farther back in the formation. Then it is our task to give encouraging honks.

There’s one more point to be made from the scripture passage in the Gospel of John about the shepherd and the sheep. Jesus said, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold, and I must bring them also.”

There are times when we in the church are tempted to become exclusive, to think and act as if only our kind of sheep — our kind of people — have God as our shepherd. We may insist that others fit into our fold, accept all our doctrines, and do everything as we do.

Some years ago, when we sent missionaries to work among Native Americans in this country, we insisted that they not sing hymns in their own native language but instead sing our hymns in English.

St. Paul reminded the church in one of his letters that “we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” Our problem is that sometimes we confuse the treasure with the vessel.

The final point is this: when you recognize God as your Good Shepherd, no matter what fold you come from, you are loved and accepted as one of God’s sheep. Amen.