Book 33

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 its 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 which showed a picture of the inside of a church and the pews were filled with sheep and one was saying to another, "We thought we were going to get a shepherd and all we got was a lousy sheep dog," 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 which want to educate us in the skills of leadership development, in how to lead, in 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 or workshops or books in 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 pretty good 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 the 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 as pastors we 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 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, 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 and 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, the world more confusing and more frightening than it once seemed. You begin to sense that you are more vulnerable than you ever dreamed that 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.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol--that our lives had become unmanageable

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. 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 the 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 very 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 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 is often self-affirming and self- defending. He or she will 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 is off to the mountains or a lake for a private religious experience. This is not in any way meant to discount the need of being alone with God at times. But it is to remind us that there is an awesome power where 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 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 other statements, the lead bird does not necessarily

have the most strenuous position. This might come as a surprise to us ordinary bird watchers, who have assumed that lead bird is the pioneer, breaking the current and providing an easier flight for those who follow behind, much like the driver of a small car or a bicyclist who gets almost a free ride, however dangerous in the wake of a mammoth truck or bus.

Some of this is true of birds in flight, but it is part of a complex aerodynamic process. Apparently the benefit of the upwash field created by the "V" formation is shared by all its members, including the lead bird. He or she is not a lonely long-suffering martyr out there in front receiving all the cold blasts of strong countercurrents.

The parish minister sometimes feels that the lead

position is the most difficult in the church. It has its difficulties and distinct vulnerabilities, and often the behavior of the flock in their concept of leadership presses the minister unsparingly. All of this is true, but the minister also has the benefit of a tremendous "upwash," if you will, created by the whole formation and by his or her peculiar place in it.

This is especially true when members of the congregation pray regularly for the congregation and for the ministers who lead it. The lay Christian, directly involved through his or her vocation in and with the secular world, and without benefit of ministerial immunity or preparation, can scarcely be supposed to have an easier post in the flock than the lead bird.

In fact there is a deep sense in which all of us are ministers, and in the work of the church, the members of the congregation are assistant ministers, and in your work in the world, you become the ministers and we who are ministers in the church are your assistants.

We are also ministers then to one another. This principle is sometimes called "the priesthood of all believers." And in a congregation like this one where the elements of Holy Communion are passed in the pews so that you receive the elements not from the ordained ministers but from the person sitting next to you, this practice is a powerful reminder that we are all ministers one to another.

What I have said here about the church is of

course true for many other organizations and businesses.

Extending and developing one or more metaphors can be a dangerous business so we need to remember that all metaphors are imperfect and that is the beauty of them.

With this in mind let's return to our geese metaphor for one more point. The research on geese in flight tells us that those in the "V" formation behind the leader often make a honking sound. Lest you misunderstand, this honking from behind is not complaining but a honking of encouragement.

I say this because in most organizations, including the church there is the kind of honking

from behind that is not for encouragement but for complaint. "Why don't we sing the good old hymns?" "Why can't do things the way we used to do them?"

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

Geese experts do not know all the reasons why geese honk in flight, but I can think of several reasons why honking from behind is necessary in the church.

The church requires such honking because it, like migrating geese, is a community in flight, a community in passage. 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.

So in this matter of the church and in our life outside the church, you and I are both shepherd and sheep. You and I are the lead goose at times and at other times we are farther back in the "V" formation. Then it is our task to give encouraging honks.

There's one more point to be made from the scripture passage read earlier from 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 and think and act as if only our kind of sheep, that is our kind of people have God as our shepherd. We don't want to recognize sheep from another fold, or if we do we insist that they fit into the fold of the Christian faith and they need to do everything as we do it and accept all the doctrines as we interpret them.

Some years ago, for example, when we sent missionaries to work among the Native Americans in this country, we insisted that they not sing hymns which they had written in their own native language, but sing instead our hymns and sing them 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 get the treasure and the vessel in which it is contained mixed up.

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.