

Easter 4 B Sermon  
John 10:11-18  
April 25, 2021

*Sheep or Shepherds?*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

I'd like to begin this morning by reiterating just how good it is to be with you today. On September 25, 2020, if you would have told me that I would be standing here with you today, I'm honestly not sure I would have believed you. September 25, 2020 was the very first time that I heard from Brian Kleemann, emailing me on behalf of the Search Committee to let me know that they had received my ministerial profile.

In the whirlwind of months between then and now, there have been numerous emails, conversations, interviews, Zoom meet-and-greet meetings, a candidacy weekend, the retirement of a dearly beloved senior minister of 35 years, the bridge ministry of a brilliant and capable Britain, and, for me, the sale of a home, the concluding of a ministry, farewells to a deeply beloved congregation, and a move to Aurora, Illinois, to join you in ministry.

I am unspeakably grateful to be here with you and deeply humbled to be joining in the ministry and mission of this truly remarkable congregation. It is with a heart overflowing with thanksgiving that I invite you to pray with me now:

*God of endings and of new beginnings, we find ourselves this day in awe of the cycle of life: the springing earth around us, the always new life within us, the future open before us. Center us now in this moment, that we might be present to your spirit among us. Amen.*

On one particular fourth Sunday in the season of Easter, a day like today, a minister gathered the children of the congregation for his “Children’s Time” talk. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm was up in the lectionary and the minister told the children about sheep. He informed them that sheep aren’t very smart animals that need lots of guidance, and that a shepherd's job is to stay close to the sheep, to protect them from wild animals and keep them from wandering off and doing foolish things that would get them hurt or worse, killed.

He gestured to the group of children gathered at his feet and said that they were the sheep and as such they needed lots of guidance. Then the minister put his hands out to the side, palms up in a dramatic gesture, and with raised eyebrows asked the children, “If you are the sheep then who is the shepherd?” It was painfully obvious to the congregation that he was thinking of himself.

A silence of a few seconds followed. Then one little girl said softly, “Jesus: Jesus is the shepherd.” Visibly surprised and a little deflated the minister responded, “Well then, who am I?” The little girl frowned thoughtfully and then said with a shrug, “I guess you must be a sheep dog.”<sup>1</sup>

Having shared the last 13 years with a sheep dog named Mashooq, let me assure you that ministers have been compared to far worse!

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Today is the fourth Sunday in the season of Easter, a day often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. As much as I like the metaphor of Jesus as shepherd, stories like this one really make me wonder how to feel about being compared to a sheep. Sheep wander off and get lost or hurt. They’re notoriously content to follow rather than lead. And, if a sheep winds up on its back, it will be stuck there until someone comes along to set it up again or until a hungry predator finds an easy meal. In fact, a few years

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from: <http://www.cleanjokeoftheday.com/jokes-sheepdogshepherd.html>.

back, a story about sheep made the news. An article reported that:

Hundreds of sheep followed their leader off a cliff in eastern Turkey, plunging to their deaths . . . while shepherds looked on in dismay. Four hundred sheep fell 15 meters to their deaths in a ravine in Van province near Iran but broke the fall of another 1,100 animals who survived, newspaper reports said . . . Shepherds from Ikizler village neglected the flock while eating breakfast, leaving the sheep to roam free. The loss to local farmers was estimated at \$74,000.<sup>2</sup>

If I'm completely honest with you, I don't really like being compared to a sheep. I'm guessing that you might not like it either. After all, New England Congregational Church has a reputation for being "a caring church for thinking people." Sheep are not thinkers, or at least that's their reputation. That's probably why some ministers are uncomfortable being referred to as "pastor"—a word that comes from the Latin noun *pastor* which means "shepherd." If the pastor is the shepherd, then that must mean that the congregation is the flock, the sheep, and let's face it, nobody wants to be a sheep.

Truthfully though, I think our text from the Gospel According to John is less about identifying people as sheep and more about identifying Jesus as shepherd. Shepherds were fairly ordinary folks in those days. Sheep thrived in the arid and sparse Palestinian landscape and served as a good source of wool, milk, and meat. If you're going to raise sheep, which need to graze vast expanses of land to find enough vegetation to stay healthy, then you're going to need shepherds and many of the greatest heroes in the Jewish Bible, were shepherds.

Stories tell us that Abraham and Sarah, the patriarch and matriarch of the people of Israel, were the keepers of great flocks; that Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep when God called him from a burning bush to deliver his people from bondage in Egypt; that David was a shepherd boy

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from: <https://www.challies.com/articles/its-not-a-compliment/>.

when he was anointed king of Israel—arguably Israel’s greatest king. It’s kind of reassuring to know that so many of these mythic heroes started out as ordinary folk with blue-collar jobs before they went on to change the course of their people’s history.

The author of John’s Gospel picked up the ancient metaphor of the shepherd and claimed it for Jesus as one who would watch over the sheep, who would know each sheep by name, and who would lay down his very own life to protect them. Shepherds lead sheep and, for Jesus, leadership looked like watching them, knowing them, providing for them, even sacrificing himself to keep them safe.

Later in John’s gospel, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out and care for the sheep—to feed his sheep. It’s worth noting that Jesus did not commission them to *be* the sheep, but to feed the sheep—to be shepherds for one another and for the world. Our charge as Jesus’ followers and as a church is no different.

Today, on my first Sunday as minister with you here at New England Congregational Church, *I* am not called to be your shepherd. *We* are called to shepherd one another. *We* are called to watch over those who are vulnerable, to get to know our neighbors and their needs, even to give of ourselves for the sake of others. *We* are called to be shepherds—to be the hands and feet, hearts and minds, eyes, ears, and mouths of the Good Shepherd in and for our world.

Following the Good Shepherd doesn’t mean being good little sheep. In this caring church for thinking people, I don’t think that message would go over particularly well anyway. Following the Good Shepherd means living and loving like the Good Shepherd in and for our world. From this day forward, may we shepherd one another. May we watch over those who are vulnerable. May we get to know one another and our neighbors. May we know one another’s needs. And may we give ourselves in service to one another as we seek to live like the Good Shepherd for the sake of this church, this community, and our world. May it be so. Amen.