

Scripture: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

Sermon Title: "Flocked!"

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Let me be frank – I don't know much about sheep. Growing up on the farm, we never had sheep and thus my knowledge here is limited. So today, I want to share with you some wisdom from a modern day shepherd – wisdom that I shared a couple months ago, at Chase Point Assisted Living during one of their weekly chapel services, when we were looking at these same texts that we read today. Craig Rogers is a shepherd in Patrick Springs, Virginia in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and shared some of his insights from his years of experience in an article that he wrote for the online publication called Modern Farmer. Here is some of his knowledge and wisdom:

"Shepherds, like the sheep themselves, learn quickly that the path to success depends on tending to the flock and caring for the individual. Providing clean water, ample forage and shelter to an entire flock is essential to maintaining the health of the flock. But the success of a shepherd or shepherdess is in the compassion they have for each individual. This means being able to identify a sick or injured sheep or lamb within a flock of hundreds or thousands of sheep. Assisting with the birth of a lamb when needed, caring for a lamb orphaned by its mother, providing the expectant mother with enhanced nutrition or weaning a lamb in a compassionate manner are all part of that job. The more concern the shepherd has for the individuals who are in need of health care, supplemental food assistance or individual attention, the healthier the flock".

I love this wisdom – I value these insights from Sepherd Rogers that remind us of the importance of taking both a macro and micro view. Looking at the big picture while also seeing the details. Looking at the entire flock and yet being intune to the needs of the individual. After all we see this mirrored too in our scripture readings today. Psalm 23 zooms in on the individual. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." These words are often turned to for comfort when we face challenges in this life and there is truly much comfort to be experienced when we know that our God cares deeply about

the needs of our hearts and of our lives. And then of course, from the Gospel of John, we see Jesus as the Good Shepherd and in these verses which Oscar offered for us today, we see a macro view, that big picture. Caring for flock – the whole and yet at the same time, when Jesus says, “I know my own”, we see that individual care and love and compassion.

This is such good news – that Jesus can look at the entire flock, caring for the whole – seeing the needs of the church, the needs of humanity and at the same time, seeing us each individually and offering just as much care and compassion to the aspects of our individual lives which need the love of a good shepherd. So may we hold that truth today and find comfort in the macro and micro love and care of our Jesus.

Now, let's look at the challenge for us. How do we, as the disciples of Christ, those called to be the hands and feet of Jesus, how do we adopt this same way of loving and caring? How do we see the whole, the whole of this community of faith, of this community in which we live, of this world, and offer care to the whole, while also be intune to the needs of the ones sitting next to us today, the ones who are absent from us today – to be intune with the struggles of our neighbor down the street, our neighbor across the country and around the world, offering love in word and deed and doing so in a way that shows care for the individual and in turn leads to a healthier flock? How do we see and meet the needs of the whole and of the individual?

My first summer during college, I was working for a local gas station and truck stop called Love's. You may have heard of it or seen in your travels. I was a cashier and general laborer for this business. Now this place was very busy and there were really no slow moments. And as such, we were taught to take a macro view of the needs of the store. One way we did this was by checking people out as fast as we could since there was always a line. And the macro view told us we didn't want people to have to wait long or in unnecessary lines and in turn this was good for the individual too. So we got people through as quick as we could. Someone would approach the counter, I would say “Hi, how are you?” and start scanning their items or processing their fuel payment.

And they would go and the next person would approach and so on and so forth. And I was getting good at this macro stuff – seeing the needs of the entire line and keeping things moving. Then one day, a gentleman stepped up, put his items on the counter, I said, “Hi, how are you?” as I started to scan and bag his road trip snacks. And he looked at me and he said with a little mischevious smile on his face, “do you really care?” And I thought to myself – what a profound question. Because we were taught to be kind and courteous, but in the end the most important thing was to take care of the big picture and the needs of the store and really not see the details of the individual lives that we were encountering, even if for just a moment. Asking “how are you?” was what we were taught to do out of courtesy not out of care. And I thought about this and I said something back to him which I still regret today – I said, “No. Not really.” Those words still haunt me from time-to-time. Now, I need you to know that in the moment, he found my response hysterical and we both laughed and he left with a smile on his face. But in that conversation that has lingered in my mind ever since, he was reminding me to look at and truly see the individual too – that it doesn’t need to be an either/or, I could see both the needs of the entire store and be fully present with the needs of the individual right in front of us.

Sometimes, we lose sight of this and we get too caught up in the needs of the larger community and forsake the hearts of the individual or we focus so much on the individual that we let the larger community fall apart. This is why I am so thankful that we have the Good Shepherd in our lives who sees both and holds both, and this model we can strive for too in how we live and this can be done in such simple ways. One that I hold close is when I ask, “How are you?”, I am, to the best of my ability, ready to simply be with the person in whatever they are holding and above all, authentically care how they are. We all can surely do that much.

Today, we have announced this new initiative called, “flocking”. Putting the sheep that you see outside and in here in the yards of loved ones and friends who are celebrating joys as we celebrate with them, who could use a smile in their lives for whatever the

reason, or simply need a reminder that they are cared for and loved as part of the flock. And in the same way, it is our hope that all who see it in the wider community, may too find a smile, find care, find their place in the fold as we come together – the flock of Christ where both the needs of the whole and the needs of the one are supplied. And in all of our lives, in every encounter, in every decision, in every moment may this be our goal as well, to see and care for the individual and the entire flock just like our Good Shepherd. So be it and may it be so. Amen.