

“Being A Sheep Is Not Baaaaad”
Rev. Bill Freeman
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Menifee United Church of Christ

Babe was a cute movie. Maybe you saw it. It was about a talking pig, Babe. And Babe, at one point in the movie, was responsible for leading sheep through an obstacle course, kind of like the Westminster Dog Show, where the dogs have to go through an obstacle course. Well, the sheep in this contest in Great Britain had to do the same and Babe had to lead them. But first he had to learn how to communicate with them. He learned the password, “Bah ram ewe, bah ram ewe,” and then he could talk to the sheep and the sheep could talk to him. They did the special effects to make their mouths move like they were talking. And Babe was able to lead the sheep and guide them through the obstacle course and he won the contest for the farmer.

Why are sheep sometimes considered to be baaaaad? Some people are called sheep. They’re thought to be like sheep in a way. Sheep are considered, perhaps unfairly, to be kind of dull animals, not very bright, they’ll do anything they’re ordered to do. And when people are like that, they’re sometimes called “sheeple.” And they will do anything they’re told to do. They’re kind of like zombies in a way, they’ll do whatever. So that’s how “sheep” get a bad connotation sometimes, when people are “sheeple.”

There’s another bad connotation involved with sheep, and it’s when someone is considered to be a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Or a wolf in grandmother’s clothing, according to the story of Little Red Riding Hood. Because people who are considered wolves in sheep’s clothing, they’re not good people. They’re evil people. They pretend to be good, they make you think they’re good, but they’re really bad. They’re really evil. They win your trust, but they do it for devious reasons, for bad reasons, for illicit reasons a lot of times.

Who could be considered a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Well, Bernie Madoff. Bernie made off with millions of dollars of people’s money. He pretended to be a trustworthy investor, who took people’s money and said he was investing it, but the whole time it was a Ponzi scheme. The people who invested with him didn’t feel the Bern, they got burned by Bernie. Bernie Madoff was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Jim Jones was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Jim Jones was a religious cult leader who took his sheep to Guyana to get away from America and American scrutiny. And they thought he was the Messiah. He fooled them quite completely. When the authorities were closing in and the media was closing in, he had them drink the KoolAid, that’s where that phrase comes from, to “drink the KoolAid,” to do whatever their leaders tell them. They drank the KoolAid that was laced with poison. And they all died. Those who didn’t die were shot dead. Jim Jones was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Ted Bundy was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Ted Bundy was a charming young man, very good looking. Mark Harmon played him in the TV movie I remember seeing years ago. He won the trust of women and then he killed them. That’s the kind of thing that wolves in sheep’s clothing do. They do evil. But not all things that are associated with sheep are evil. A lot is good.

God is our shepherd, we are God’s sheep. The 23rd Psalm tells us that. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” God leads us beside still waters. The 23rd Psalm tells us how God is always looking out for us, is good for us. He leads us beside the still waters, he restores our souls, he anoints our head with oil and he gives us eternal life.

What does it mean for God to be our Good Shepherd? It means that God loves us unconditionally. God guards us, guides us, helps us. God is always watching over us, God is always with us, always wants what’s best for us. We may not always seek the best path, but then God guides us back to the right path. That’s what it means for God to be our shepherd.

Jesus is our shepherd, we are Jesus’ sheep. Jesus said, according to the Gospels, “the sheep hear my voice and they follow me.” Jesus gives us eternal life. Nobody can snatch us out of Jesus’ hand because Jesus is our good shepherd.

What does it mean that Jesus is our good shepherd? Similar to God, it means that Jesus guards us and guides us. Jesus loves us unconditionally. Jesus wants what’s best for us. Jesus helps us along the road of life, along our spiritual path. Jesus loves us. Not just the song we sang when we were kids, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” That helped us to learn that, but now, hopefully, now that we are adults, we know that Jesus loves us, that he loves us unconditionally, that he helps us along the way many times. Jesus is our Good Shepherd.

Jesus looks for lost sheep. According to the Gospels, Jesus tells a parable about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. Then if one of them goes astray, the shepherd will leave the ninety-nine and look for the one sheep that’s run away. And when he finds the sheep, he puts it on his shoulders and carries it back to his loved ones and they’ll throw a party because the sheep that was lost has now been found. It’s like the story of the Prodigal Son. The prodigal son

returns to the father and the father throws a party because “this son of mine who was lost has been found.” That’s what Jesus does for us when we’re found.

Have you ever been lost and then found by Jesus? I know I have. Many times. I think I’ve told some of you the story about how I felt called to the ministry when I was about seven years old. But I didn’t answer the call for about forty years. Finally I gave in, and I think Jesus was pleased that I finally returned to the fold. At one point I thought about becoming a Unitarian. I preached in a Unitarian church for three years, I was a minister there. But then Jesus brought me back. I realized I was a Christian and not a Unitarian. I believe in the Trinity, in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Has Jesus ever brought you back from... whatever? Maybe you had ill health and Jesus brought you back. Maybe you got lost in some kind of addiction, drugs or alcohol, whatever, and Jesus put you on his shoulders and brought you back home. Jesus does that.

Jesus separates the sheep and the goats. That’s another story we read about in the Gospels. Jesus says many times, “The Son of God will come back and will separate the sheep and the goats and will say to the sheep, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you visited me.” And the sheep will say, “Lord, when did we see you in need and help you?” And Jesus will say, “Whenever you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to the goats, “I was hungry and you did not give me food, I was thirsty and you did not give me something to drink, I was naked and you did not clothe me, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, I was sick and you did not care for me, I was in prison and you did not visit me.” And the goats will say, “When did we see you in need and not help you?” And Jesus will say, “When you did not do it to the least of these who are members my family, you did not do it for me.” And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

What can we do to make sure we are sheep and not goats? Well, we can do what Jesus taught us. What our Good Shepherd wanted us to do. We can love our neighbor. We can love our enemy. We can love everyone. We can forgive everyone. We can help everyone. We can welcome everyone. And this church does that. We have our food pantry. We have our clothing closet. We fed 140 people on Thanksgiving Day. We fed 90 people on Christmas Day. That’s the kind of thing that make us sheep rather than goats, and many of you helped out with that.

Jesus is both shepherd and sheep. According to the Gospels, Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist sees Jesus coming and says, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” So Jesus is both shepherd and sheep, or lamb, which is a baby sheep, I think, I’m a city boy, so I’m not a farming expert, but as I understand it, a lamb is a baby sheep, so Jesus is both shepherd and sheep.

Where would we be if Jesus had never been born? What would the world look like? Have you ever thought about that? Remember in the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life,” which some of us watch like sheep every year I suppose, where George Bailey wishes he’d never been born and his guardian angel, Clarence, grants his wish. Then he sees what the world would be like if he’d never been born and it’s an awful place, the little town that he lived in. Multiply that by billions of times and we can get an idea of what the world would be like if Jesus had never come to this earth. My home town is Grand Rapids, Michigan. In Grand Rapids there are two homeless shelters, there’s a soup kitchen, there’s a couple of coffee houses for homeless and poor people, there’s a clothing place called In The Image, all of them run by Christians. And there’s a hospital, St. Mary’s Hospital. I was born in St. Mary’s Hospital. A Catholic hospital. I always imagine that in the middle of the night, back in the fifties, a well-meaning priest baptized all of us heathen Protestant babies. I figure that’s why I have such an affinity for the Catholic Church and especially Pope Francis. Anyway, the world would be a much worse place, I think, if Jesus hadn’t come to the earth.

Jesus plays a dual role in heaven as well. Jesus is both shepherd and sheep. According to the book of Revelation, Jesus will be on the throne in heaven as the Lamb of God. But he’ll also be the shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who gives life to his sheep. He gives eternal life to his sheep.

Have you ever noticed how often sheep and shepherds are mentioned in the Bible? I never really noticed until I worked on this sermon. And I only covered a fraction of the number of times that sheep and shepherds and lambs are mentioned in the Bible. Why are they mentioned so often? Well, it’s probably because for Jesus, it was part of his environment. He was living in an agrarian society where sheep and shepherds were all over the place and so he speaks the language of the people who are with him and who followed him. So he speaks about lambs and sheep and shepherds. And I was just amazed, looking at Revelation, how it all then comes together. Almost as if it were inspired by an Intelligent Designer. Or at least the Holy Spirit.

But we are not Jesus. We are not Jesus. I am not Jesus. You are not Jesus. We try to be like Jesus. We try to follow Jesus. But we’re not Jesus. I would like to be able to heal a blind man or raise someone from the dead, but we’re not

Jesus. Unfortunately, the other day, a couple weeks ago actually, I had to have one of the homeless people here arrested. As the deputy sheriff was handcuffing her, with her hands behind her back, she looked at me and she said, "I will never follow you again." And I said, "Don't follow me, follow Jesus." And the deputy said, "Yes!" She got out the next day and she was OK, but I hated to do it. Sometimes we have to do that kind of thing. Then the other day, as you know, we've had to end our residential assistance program. We tried it for a year and a half, but people just abused our generosity. There were drug deals in the parking lot, there were people shooting up in the Peace Garden, people stole from us, people were fighting, and we had to put a stop to it. We were enabling them rather than empowering them. We were enabling them to continue the life they were leading rather than empowering them to lead a better life. But I talked to the City Manager because I want us to keep our hands in it. I want us to continue to help people in need, including homeless people. The City Manager, when I told him how we feed people and have a food pantry, and how we have a clothing closet, said, "You do 'inreach.'" You don't do outreach. Most churches do outreach. They'll help people twenty minutes away or half a world away, but they don't help people in their church. You help people in your church. Rob Johnson, the City Manager, suggested that we get together with the Interfaith Council, an organization we belong to and I go to their meetings, and maybe they can do something to help the homeless. I'm hoping that's true.

How can we be like Jesus? Well, back in my hometown of Grand Rapids, some churches get together in what's called the Interfaith Hospitality Network. They have transformed part of their buildings with showers and laundry facilities and beds. And each church takes a week and has a homeless family or two stay in their church, and they only have to do it about three or four weeks a year and then no one church has to take care of the homeless all by themselves, like we were trying to do. So maybe something like that is a possibility down the road. We want to be good sheep and follow the Good Shepherd.

At our Rummage Sale the other day I bought a little Christmas tree. They talked me into buying some ornaments and lights and stuff for it and it's in my office. My calendar isn't off, I know we just celebrated Easter and Christmas isn't for several months, but the reason I did that was to remind me that every day is Christmas. Every day is Christmas when we bring Jesus into our hearts.

So what do we have to do to have Jesus in our hearts? Well, we have to follow the Good Shepherd. We have to follow Jesus the Shepherd and we have to follow God our Shepherd, and the Holy Spirit our Shepherd, too. A member of this congregation, after a couple of homeless people volunteered at our Rummage Sale yesterday, took the homeless people into his home for the evening. So the homeless people had a place to stay. Maybe that's our new homeless program. Individuals helping other individuals, following the Good Shepherd. Because when you do things like that and I know people in this church do good things for folks all the time, when we do that we are bringing Jesus into our hearts and following the Good Shepherd.

Let us pray:

God of love, help us to follow Jesus, help us to be Jesus' sheep and help us to remember that Jesus is the Good Shepherd we need to follow. Now and forevermore. By the power of the Holy Spirit. And in the name of Jesus. Amen.