

David W. Lloyd: Feeding Lambs and Tending Sheep

A Sermon by David W. Lloyd

Seekers Church

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Feeding Lambs and Tending Sheep

Last week Annamarie White helped us see how we all need to deal with experiences of feeling abandoned in the wilderness. (If you haven't done so already, I encourage you to [read her sermon](#) on the [Seekers Website](#) or to ask Hollis for a tape.)

She used part of the 21st chapter of John's Gospel, where Jesus appeared to the disciples for the third time since he rose from the dead at Easter, and before the Holy Spirit empowered them at Pentecost to begin the Church.

In that 21st chapter, those disciples who had been fishermen before they began to follow Jesus had gone back to fishing now that he was dead. They'd fished all night and didn't catch anything; they would probably say that they "couldn't even catch a cold." A voice from the shore called to them to cast their nets on the starboard side, and they caught so many fish they couldn't pull them in. Peter knew it was Jesus, and instead of rowing in wearing just his underclothes, he put on his cloak, dove in, and swam to shore. One time when Peter had been in a boat with the other disciples, way back weeks or months before Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter, they had seen Jesus walking on the water and thought he was a ghost. Peter had called to Jesus, saying that if he was really Jesus, he should ask Peter to come to him over the water. Jesus had

called Peter's bluff by calling his name. Peter had started to walk on the water until he grew afraid, and had started to sink. This time, Peter knew right away that it was Jesus and went over the side of the boat to swim to him, putting on his clothes but unafraid to drown.

Or maybe Peter was hoping to drown. For Peter knew that he had abandoned Jesus. In the early morning of Good Friday, people linked Peter to Jesus three times, and all three times, in fear of being arrested, tortured, and condemned to death like Jesus, he had denied that he knew him. If Peter reached the shore, what could he possibly say to Jesus? How could he even look at him after abandoning him? Maybe drowning would be better...

But Peter did reach the shore and the disciples followed in the boat. Jesus gave them all food, even Peter. After breakfast Jesus turned to Peter and asked, "**Simon, son of John, do you love me more than everything else, more than these do?**" Jesus didn't call him Peter, the rock on which he would build the kingdom, since Peter had denied that he knew him. And for the word we call "love" John uses the Greek word "*agape*," which means the kind of love that God has for us – always extended to us, totally forgiving, and totally self-sacrificing. Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." And in Peter's reply for the word "love" John uses the Greek word "*philia*," which means the kind of love that friends and brothers and sisters have for each other – a caring, concern, and respect, but short of the type of love that God has for us. Jesus accepted this, and then challenged him, "**Feed my lambs.**" Jesus asked again, "**Simon, son of John, do you *agape* me?**" Peter replied, "Yes, Lord, you know that I *philia* you." Jesus challenged him again, "**Then tend my sheep.**" Then, to match the three times Peter had abandoned him, and in recognition that Peter knew that he could not match his own never-ending, totally forgiving and self-sacrificing love, Jesus asked, "**Simon, son of John, do you *philia* me as my**

friend and brother?" And now Peter was hurt, both that Jesus asked him again, and that this time he didn't continue to challenge him to live up to God's way of loving. So Peter replied, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I *philia* you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." And Peter knew that Jesus meant his brothers and sisters in Christ, not real sheep. Peter's abandonment of Jesus has been transformed into a challenge to nurture community.

Why did Christ refer to his followers as sheep? Now I admit that I never grew up on a farm, and I never raised sheep. But my father was a county agent, and I've been around sheep when I went with him as a boy to visit farms and at the Delaware State Fair. When I was in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia, there were lots of sheep. You'd see them being driven to market and if you hiked into the countryside you'd see them in pastures or at pools of water in the creeks. I actually lived with sheep. My first year I lived in two rooms of a row house, and my landlady kept sheep in the room adjoining mine.

So I know a bit about sheep. You may remember the movie, "Babe," and the derogatory way that the sheepdogs referred to the sheep. I think the movie got it about right: sheep are not the brightest animal to have made it through the evolutionary process, they can get into lots of trouble, and they can be among the most stubborn creatures. What the movie didn't say is that sheep can also be destructive to the environment. The jaws and teeth of sheep and goats are structured in a way that they can crop plants closer to the ground than cattle, horses, and donkeys. In environments that are semi-desert, sheep and goats may over-graze the available vegetation and actually help create desert. (This is one of the reasons that cattlemen in the American West hated sheep and we had range wars with cattlemen killing sheep and shepherds.) So on balance, sheep may be more like us than we'd like to admit. On the positive side, sheep are very adaptable to different environments, and they provide us with wool and meat.

How should Peter feed and tend Christ's sheep? What does a sheep want from a shepherd? What do we want from community? We can find some answers in the bulletin insert, the 23rd Psalm. On one side it's printed in the New English Bible version, and on the other, for you diehards, it's in the King James Version. According to long-standing tradition, David wrote this Psalm about his experience as a shepherd, before he became King of Israel. Years ago, in a Reader's Digest collection of favorite articles, I found a condensed article from the National Wool Grower, entitled, "*The Basque Shepherd and the Shepherd Psalm*," by James K. Wallace. The Basque region of Spain is noted for its sheep, and Ferando D'Alfonso, is the Basque shepherd of the title.

Let me quote major portions of the article:

"David and his ancestors," said D'Alfonso, "knew sheep and their ways, and David has translated a sheep's musing into simple words ... Many of its lines are the statements of the simple requirements and actual duties of a Holy Land shepherd, whether he lives today or followed the same calling 6000 years ago."

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

"Sheep instinctively know," said, D'Alfonso, "...that the shepherd has planned out their grazing for the morrow... He [may] take them back over the same range; it may be that he will go to a new grazing ground. They do not worry. His guidance has been good in the past and they have faith in the future because they know he has their well being in view."

Like Peter, we are challenged to make sure others' needs are met. Seekers is a church of, by, and for the laity. You and I are both the shepherds and sheep of the congregation. Like sheep, we trust that our needs for the next Sunday's worship,

and teachers for next Sunday's children and youth, or for the next meeting of a mission group or class in the School of Christian Living, will be taken care of. But while the committed members and leadership team care for the overall life of Seekers, each person here is a shepherd, accepting responsibility for and being willing to be accountable for the life of this congregation. Our next challenge for shepherding is to reach out and deepen our care for those not in our congregation at the same level of responsibility and accountability that we show within the congregation.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

"When [sheep] are contentedly chewing their cud, the shepherd knows they are putting on fat," said D'Alfonso. "Consequently the good shepherd starts his flocks out in the early hours on the rougher herbage, moving on through the morning to the richer, sweeter, grasses, and finally coming to a shady place for their forenoon rest in fine green pastures, best grazing of the day. Sheep, resting in such happy surroundings, feel contentment."

We feed Christ's lambs in green pastures when we model agape love – always extended, totally forgiving, and totally self-sacrificing. It means that in the School of Christian Living we share our questions, hopes, fears, and vulnerabilities and provide a safe place for others to share their questions, their hopes, their fears, and their vulnerabilities with us. It means we use our best efforts to help another on their inward and outward spiritual journeys. It means that we nurture the spiritual journeys of our children and youth, answering the tough questions of the confirmation class, including those about abortion. Such acts of agape love are green pastures where our brother and sister sheep find peace, contentment, and God's agape.

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

"Everyone knows," said the Basque, "that sheep will not drink gurgling water. There are many small springs high in the hills of the Holy Land, whose waters run down the valleys only to evaporate in the desert sun. Although the sheep need the water, they will not drink these fast flowing streams. The shepherd must find a place where rocks or erosion have made a little pool, or fashion with his hands a pocket sufficient to hold a bucketful."

In Seekers we know that spiritual growth requires still waters. We call this the inward journey, and it requires silence, meditation, prayer, retreat, and cultivation of the art of listening to our own soul and to the souls of others. When our mission groups, our School of Christian Living, our retreats, and our worship provide sufficient pools of quiet, of silence, of reflection, for others to drink their spiritual fill, we are providing still waters for others to drink deeply.

He restoreth my soul; He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

"Holy Land sheep [have a strong] herding instinct," went on D'Alfonso. "Each takes his place in the grazing line in the morning and keeps the same position throughout the day. Once, however, during the day each sheep leaves its place and goes to the shepherd. Whereupon, the shepherd stretches out his hand, as the sheep approaches with expectant eyes and mild little baas. The shepherd rubs its nose and ears, scratches its chin, whispers affectionately into its ears. The sheep, meanwhile, rubs against his leg, or if the shepherd is sitting down, nibbles at his ear, and rubs its cheek against his face. After a few minutes of this communion with the master, the sheep returns to its place in the feeding line."

We Seekers restore our brother's and sister's souls when we provide the time, the listening, the tenderness, the affirmation, and the caring for each other so that others receive the philia and agape they need.

Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear not evil. Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.

"There is an actual Valley of the Shadow of Death in Palestine...It is south of the Jericho Road leading from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and is a narrow defile through a mountain range. Climatic and grazing conditions make it necessary for the sheep to be moved through this valley for seasonal feedings each year. The valley is four and a half miles long. Its side walls are over 1500 feet high in places and it is only ten or 12 feet wide at the bottom. Travel through the valley is dangerous, because its floor, badly eroded by cloudbursts, has gullies seven or eight feet deep. Actual footing on solid rock is so narrow in many places that a sheep cannot turn around, and it is an unwritten law of shepherds that flocks must go up the valley in the morning hours and down toward the eventide, lest flocks meet in the defile. About halfway through the valley the walk crosses from one side to the other at a place where the path is cut in two by an eight-foot gully. One section of the path is about 18 inches higher than the other; the sheep must jump across it. The shepherd stands at this break and coaxes or forces the sheep to make the leap. If a sheep slips and lands in the gully, the shepherd's rod is brought into play. The old-style crook is encircled around a large sheep's neck or a small sheep's chest, and it is lifted to safety. If a more modern narrow crook is used, the sheep is caught about the hoofs and lifted up to the walk.

Many wild dogs lurk in the shadows of the valley looking for prey... Unable to retreat, the leader baas a warning. The shepherd... throw[s] his staff... at the dog and knocks the animal into the washed-out gully where it is easily killed. Thus the sheep have learned to fear no evil even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death for their master is there to protect them from harm."

It is a hard fact of life that we all pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death more than once. We tend Christ's sheep when we look out for, support and protect each other through the rough places. I am heartened when people in Seekers have that meal together, or make that phone call, or send the note, that helps us bridge the chasms of abandonment, of loneliness, of depression. I see Seekers tending Christ's sheep in Hope and a Home's support for the Freeman family, in gathering clothes for women entering the job market from welfare, in raising money for FLOC.

Sometimes tending sheep means that we must grapple with evil. We have to kill wild dogs, but they are part of God's creation, too, so we must not do this lightly. I see Seekers killing the wild dogs that attack Christ's sheep when we speak out on legislation and executive branch actions that will hurt the least of us. And I thank Pat, Trish, Emily, Kate, and Cathy for pointing out those wild dogs, and throwing the staff of truth to protect our flock.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.

"David's meaning is a simple one," said D'Alfonso, "when conditions on the Holy Land sheep ranges are known. Poisonous plants abound which are fatal to grazing animals. Each spring the shepherd must be constantly alert. When he finds the plants he takes his mattock and goes on ahead of the flock, grubbing out every stock and root he can see. As he digs out

the stocks, he lays them upon little stone pyres, some of which were built by shepherds in Old Testament days, and by the morrow they are dry enough to burn. In the meantime, the sheep are led into the newly prepared pasture, which is now free from poisonous plants, and, in the presence of their deadly plant enemies, they eat in peace."

When we feed Christ's sheep, we have to do some hard digging of tough, stubborn roots of poisonous plants. Some churches would identify poisonous plants with false doctrine, with heresy, and erroneous beliefs. But Seekers is not a congregation that focuses on doctrines, on creeds, on beliefs. This lack of doctrinal emphasis is confusing to the youth of Seekers, who meet other Christian youth whose churches emphasize creeds and beliefs. This is why our confirmation class is so important.

I suspect that the poisonous plants that threaten our Seekers flock, particularly our little lambs, are not false doctrines purporting to be Christian. Rather, they are toxic parts of our secular culture – TV shows, movies, and music, and art that appear to feed our senses but poison our souls. They include beliefs: that we are not responsible for our brothers and sisters, that all things are relative, that the only way to keep despair and hopeless at bay is to claim entitlement to redress, that everything has a monetary value, and that only things with a high monetary value are important. We have a lot of tough digging to do to uproot these poisons.

Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

"As the sheep come in for the night they are led to a gate. The shepherd lays his rod across the top of the gateway just higher than the backs of his sheep. As each sheep passes in single file, he quickly examines it for briars in the ears, snags in the cheek, or weeping of the eyes from dust or

scratches. When such conditions are found, he drops the rod across the sheep's back and it steps out of line. Each sheep's wounds are carefully cleaned. Then the shepherd dips his hand into the olive oil and anoints the injury. A large cup is dipped into the jar of water, kept cool by evaporation in the unglazed pottery, and is brought out – never half full but always overflowing. The sheep will sink its nose into the water clear to the eyes, if fevered, and drink until fully refreshed."

When we care about each other we help clean the wounds we all have suffered. We don't blame each other for having been injured; we provide the soothing oil of agape that allows those wounds to heal. And we are not stingy about such love any more than God is stingy with agape. In a few moments we will eat the bread and drink from the cup that remind us that God did not spare his only Son from our evil. Rather, he willingly died to show us how powerless evil and death really are. So when we offer that same unending, totally forgiving, totally self-sacrificing love to one another, our cup will overflow.

So," concluded D'Alfonso, "after all the care and protection the shepherd has given it, a sheep may well soliloquize in the twilight, as translated into words by David: *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*"

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1. **PSALM 23**

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

He leadeth me beside the still waters;

He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's

sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me,
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine
enemies;
Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my
life,
And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

PSALM 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall want nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
And leads me beside the waters of peace;
He renews life within me,
And for his name's sake guides me in the right path.
Even though I walk through a valley dark as death
I fear no evil, for thou art with me,
Thy staff and thy crook are my comfort.
Thou spreadest a table for me in the sight of my enemies;
Thou hast richly bathed my head with oil, and my cup runs
over.
Goodness and love unfailing, these will follow me all the days
of my life,
And I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long