

There was a shepherd tending his sheep at the edge of a country road. A brand new Maserati Levante SUV screeched to a halt next to him. The driver, a young man dressed in a Dolce and Gabbana suit, Prada shoes, Ray-Ban Aviator glasses, and a Bvlgari wrist watch got out and said to the shepherd: “If I guess how many sheep you have, will you give one of them to me?”

The shepherd looked at the young man, then looked out across the sprawling field of sheep and said: “Yeah, sure.”

The young man parked the SUV, connected his iPad to the 5G wireless network; entered a private uplink, scanned the ground using real-time satellite imagery, opened a database filled with Excel tables and algorithms, then printed a report on his mini printer. He turned to the shepherd and said: “You have exactly 1,586 sheep here.”

The shepherd was amazed: “That’s really something. You can have the sheep of your choice.”

The young man picked up one of the animals and put it in the back of his vehicle.

The shepherd looked at him and said: “Now, if I guess your profession, will you pay me back in kind?”

The young man answered: “Sure.”

The shepherd said: “You are a consultant.”

“How did you know that?” asked the man.

Simple, said the shepherd. “First, you came here without being asked. Second, you do not understand anything about my business. And third, you charged me a fee to tell me something I already knew. Now I’d really like to have my dog back.

This is Shepherd Sunday, the 4th Sunday in the Easter season. Today we have a discussion of Jesus as shepherd from John's Gospel, and we have the incredibly pastoral 23rd Psalm, which tells us that God is our shepherd.

Heavenly shepherds were meant to evoke a certain image in approximately 1000 BCE, when this psalm was written, and a millenia later, when Jesus described himself as a shepherd. In ancient Israel, everyone was familiar with shepherds, and so could understand the concept. But not so much today.

Have you ever met a shepherd? Do you really know what shepherds do? I would be very surprised if anyone answered either of those questions with a "yes." I think that what we typically see in our mind's eye, when we think of a shepherd is what we see in stained glass windows. Jesus the Good Shepherd is beautifully clean, with glowing robes, a wooden crook and a couple of pristine white sheep lying placidly beside him. In some cases, there is a cute, cuddly lamb lying across Jesus' shoulders. But that image is not what Jesus was describing to his listeners.

The image Jesus had in mind was of someone who, for all intents and purposes lived with the sheep. Someone therefore who would have been dirty and smelly most of the time. A person who knew the different personalities of the sheep, and someone whom the sheep knew and trusted. The shepherd was a person who pretty much gave up his life, or at least gave the majority of his time, for the ones he tended. And he was someone who cared deeply about each and every sheep in the flock. So

much so, that if the flock was attacked by a predator, the shepherd would step in to defend his sheep.

What I always pictured, the shepherd standing behind the sheep, sort of pushing the herd in a direction, is not accurate either. If you try that, the flock will scatter. Shepherds lead their sheep. And it is absolutely true that sheep will follow their shepherd's voice. There are several videos on YouTube that demonstrate this. In one, the shepherd simply stands in the gate of the enclosure and repeats "c'mon" several times, in the same tone of voice. The sheep from across the field and up the hillside all move toward the enclosure while the shepherd stands as the gate.

Some of what Jesus alluded to, came from a prophet in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). In the 34th chapter of Ezekiel, the prophet says that God is fed up with the leaders of Israel. God compares those leaders to shepherds who did not take care of their sheep, but instead, used the sheep for their own gain. And Ezekiel says,

¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

And of course, Jesus knew the 23rd Psalm as well. He understood what it meant to say that the Lord is our shepherd. He knew what it was to lie down in green

pastures and not to have to worry about the shadow of death, because the Good Shepherd would be beside us.

Jesus wanted the Temple authorities to understand that he was the Shepherd of whom Ezekiel and the psalmist had spoken. He was the embodiment of the one who would lead all of God's people out of the wilderness to the place of blessed rest and refreshment. He would be the one whose voice God's flock would follow. The men to whom Jesus spoke were the same people whom he referred to blind guides who strain at a gnat but swallow a camel, in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus wanted these men to know that not only were they not leading the people, but they were, in fact, hindering them. And Jesus was there to offer leadership.

But what does that shepherd leadership look like in modern-day America?

If we are to be shepherd leaders like Jesus, we must believe in him, and lead others in the direction that Jesus travels. But being a shepherd in Jesus' day was not easy nor safe. And following in Jesus' footsteps is no easier or safer today.

To my mind, one of the great shepherds of the 20th Century Episcopal Church was the Most Rev. John Hines. Bishop Hines was elected as Diocesan Bishop of Texas at the age of 44, in 1955. For the next ten years, he did everything he could to integrate every level of ministry in his diocese. His commitment to the Social Justice Gospel was unshakable. He believed that what Jesus taught, how Jesus led us, was toward justice and equality for everyone.

When I served a church in Houston, I met a man who had been an Assistant US Attorney during Bishop Hines' time there. This man was a life-long Episcopalian and he served at the diocesan level on several committees. Over time, Bishop Hines began calling on him to go and visit the rural Texas congregations where Jim Crow segregation was still the norm. Speaking for the Bishop, and passing out his business cards, showing his Federal Government connections, this man began to convince these small-town rectors and vestries, that they should follow the lead of their Bishop and begin to work toward desegregation.

In 1965, Bishop Hines was elected Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church. There, he continued and expanded his fight for equality across the Church. In 1971, he began advocating for the companies in which the Church invested its money to begin divesting from South Africa, in order to bring an end to apartheid in that country. He retired in 1974, after his nine-year term as Presiding Bishop ended. But he did not stop advocating for the equality, particularly by way of women's ordination. He kept up that fight until it became a reality in 1976.

Bishop Hines was a shepherd in the mold of Jesus. He cared about all the sheep, but especially about those who were being left behind by the majority of the flock. He worked tirelessly to help those who lived in poverty and those who were being kept away from voting booths. Indeed, all those whom the world refused to acknowledge as equals. And although Bishop Hines lived into his 80s, he quite literally

put his life on the line for the flock when the segregationists took offense to his teaching, preaching, and actions.

In some ways, our world today is better than it was when +John Hines took up his shepherd's crook and walked ahead of the flock into difficult areas. But in other ways, the more things change, the more they stay the same. There is much work to do if we are to emulate Jesus as a shepherd. Some of it is mundane and monotonous, other parts carry danger. Some of it will not make us popular. But the work is there to be done. And all we junior shepherds have to do is to follow the voice of our Good Shepherd. He will lead us where we need to be and protect us along the way.

In the name of Jesus, the shepherd of all. Amen.