

WHEN SHEEP BECOME SHEPHERDS

John 21:1-19
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It had been the best week of camp. It had been the worst week of camp. On the last night of that church camp, I sat on the big rock in the outdoor chapel overlooking Indiana's White River, wondering how one week could be both the best and the worst. Right on time, our camp director, Pastor Ken or "Big Bird" as we'd affectionately nicknamed him, came over to ask what I was pondering. I explained how confused I was: I thought it had been a terrible week of camp; I hadn't gotten the lead in the musical, hadn't performed that well in the talent show either, and I didn't even have a camp boyfriend! Yet, I was strangely satisfied about the week. I'd spent a lot of time counseling friends who were going through tough times in their faith journeys and personal lives. I'd really enjoyed taking the lead in the daily Bible studies, and was really touched by how many people had given me hugs during our closing communion to say "thanks" for all the help I'd given them during the week. "I just don't get it, Big Bird. It really was the worst week of camp, but I think it was my favorite week of camp. But that doesn't make any sense." That's when Big Bird became Pastor Ken in my mind as he wisely said, "Mary, I think you may be hearing God calling you to be a minister. That may be why this has been your favorite week of camp, because you were shepherding people instead of being shepherded. Let's figure out what's next."

There comes a time in every disciple's life when we move from sheep to shepherd, and that time had come for the disciples when Jesus met them on the beach after his death and resurrection. If you remember, it was a beach three years earlier, where Jesus had first called them to follow, to be sheep following the Good Shepherd, so they could learn to fish for people

instead of fish. Along the way, Jesus sent them out as “Shepherds in training,” sending them in pairs to begin serving and shepherding others. But always, they would return to Jesus for my guidance and more learning. Sheep, then shepherds, then sheep again. But now Jesus has died, and even the Risen Christ knows he is no longer earth-bound. On earth, new shepherds would need to take his place. Peter and the disciples were called to be those shepherds. But here they are, back in their fishing boats, returning to the familiar lives they had known before Jesus. They didn’t seem to know what to do, what was next for them. And so, they go fishing. In that familiar place, Jesus meets them on the shore to nourish them one more time and remind them of the call that had first pulled them out of those fishing boats to fish for people, so they could figure out what was next for their faith and ministry.

“Do you love me?” Jesus asks. “You know that I do.” “Then feed my sheep.” A second time, Jesus asks and Peter affirms, and then a third time, Peter impatiently explodes with confirmation of his love and dedication, and Jesus reminds him one last time. “Feed my lambs.” Jesus places his trust in this man who had only a short time ago denied three times even knowing Jesus, but now is invited to proclaim his faith three times, with increasing passion to compensate for the doubts and fears that had misled him as Jesus journeyed toward the cross. Now, the sheep, even those who fled, denied, and doubted, are called forth to become the shepherds who would carry on the work begun by Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Now, the disciples will shepherd and guide new followers onto the pathway of following the Way of Jesus.

On this Mother’s Day, I am reminded that we all begin as children, as little lambs, if you will. We need loving parent-figures to hold us and protect us, caring mother-figures to nourish us and love us, guiding families and friends to show us the way we should go. And like Jesus’ disciples, we slowly grow into full-fledged sheep, with stubborn minds of our own, woolly

mantles of the people we have become, and sometimes stupid, even dangerous, outcomes of the mistaken choices we have made. Like those disciples before us, we also slowly grow into full-fledged sheep, with minds molded by the shepherds who have guided us along the way, beautiful coats of the values and teachings they have imparted and we have received, and sometimes life-giving, transformative outcomes of the loving, wise choices we have made. As children of both parents and God, we eventually grow into adults in our own right. But as each stage of the journey comes to a close, we have to figure out what's next in order to grow into the next stage.

This comes intuitively to us as babies and young children, as long as we're healthy and our bodies and minds are fully able. Think about babies who begin crawling. It's never enough for them. They want to crawl further and faster. First, they're just thrilled with crawling, but then they want to get to that toy or explore that mysterious cabinet. I can still remember when our son Michael was first crawling and I left him alone in the kitchen for just a minute, where he was happily banging on pots and pans. When the house grew curiously quiet, I rushed back down the hall to find him surrounded by a floor full of cheerios. He'd figured out how to get into the lower snack cabinet, and was now happily arranging cheerios around his pots and pans, occasionally eating one for good measure. We didn't have to teach him to explore, to figure out what was next in this new world of mobility. He figured it out for himself: what was next was being able to get his own snacks and create his own art project.

Before long, babies are pulling themselves upright so they can reach objects higher up and see things from a better vantage point. And before you know it, they're toddling across a room and getting to toys and adventures even more quickly. All the while, their minds and spirits are growing, taking in new information, receiving the loving support of mommies and daddies, nanas and papas, siblings and friends and caregivers who show them in human terms

what they already know deep in their soul: they are created to be loved and to love. And so, babies reach back with big hugs and smiles, quiet cuddles and delighted hand claps and laughter.

As we grow older, the intuition to grow may weaken, and so we help one another along the way, continuing to ask ourselves and one another, “What’s next?” The growth process of asking “what’s next in my faith and ministry” is one that we invite our young people to embark upon when they start Sunday School and then later begin youth group and even more intentionally when they begin the confirmation journey to decide what faith and ministry they want to affirm and embrace for their lives as young adults. Later this morning, we are going to meet and bless our confirmation students, young people who are no longer little lambs following in Mama’s footsteps, but young adults, ready to begin forging their own paths and following the Spirit’s guidance as they sense and recognize God’s presence and guidance in their lives. They will study and learn together this year. They will laugh and play. They will pray and meditate. They will question and debate. They will think and decide. “Is this Jesus thing really my thing?” “Am I ready to follow where God leads, not because some adults told me to, but because I am ready to claim the Jesus path for myself?” “Will I trust myself enough to listen for the Spirit and recognize Spirit’s call as it comes to me?” “Am I willing to ask at every new stage of the journey, ‘What’s next?’ and then bravely go to the next “next,” that may be completely new and unfamiliar from the places I’ve been before?”

These are questions that we can ask ourselves at any stage of the Christian journey. “Is this Jesus thing really my thing?” “Am I ready to follow where God leads, not because some adults told me to, but because I am ready to claim the Jesus path for myself?” “Will I trust myself enough to listen for the Spirit and recognize Spirit’s call as it comes to me?” “Am I willing to ask at every new stage of the journey, ‘What’s next?’ and then bravely go to the next
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next, that may be completely new and unfamiliar than the places I've been before?"

Those first disciples had to ask themselves the same questions after Jesus' death. "Is this Jesus thing really my thing, or is the fishing thing really my thing?" "Am I ready to follow God, even when no human is right here telling me what to do?" "Will I trust myself to discover what's next and go to whatever new next awaits, or am I going to return to the familiar fishing boat I once left behind?"

Asking these questions, wrestling with our self-doubts, and yearning for a parent or shepherd to just tell us what to do and where to go is part of the journey, whether we're 13 or 33 or 93. Because we are always moving between our role as sheep who follow, shepherds who lead, and sheep-shepherds who are still growing and changing as God calls us to whatever is next.

But one question remains the same: God asking us, "Do you love me?" And then reminding us, "If you do, love my children." "If you do, feed my sheep." "If you do, let's move forward together to whatever is next, so more of God's children discover God's love and more of God's sheep are fed and cared for.

Whoever we are – lambs, sheep, or shepherds; children, youth, or adults – we are all included in Christ's flock, a part of God's family, nourished by Christ the Good Shepherd, who loves and nourishes each and every one of us, just as he loved and nourished those first disciples. And, wherever we are on life's journey – learners, followers, or leaders; just starting out, beginning to spread our wings, or running full speed ahead – Christ's call is to each and every one of us, inviting us to love God, love one another, and love neighbors and strangers as God loves us.

Ten years after that evening at church camp, I was sitting in my office when one of our graduating seniors dropped by to talk. “Pastor Mary,” she asked, “How do I tell my parents that God is calling me to be a pastor, not a doctor?” “I don’t know for sure,” I replied, but let’s pray about it so God can help us figure out what’s next.”

Loving Shepherd, source of every good thing,
 you feed us from your hand
 that we may in turn feed others.
 Meet us on the roads we tread
 and shake us from our complacency,
 that we may see the dawn of your love,
 in every morning’s sunrise,
 and in every call to feed your sheep.
 Fill us with your Spirit,
 that we may love each other
 as Christ, our shepherd, has loved us,
 as we pray together the prayer that he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
 hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come,
 thy will be done,
 on earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our sins,
 as we forgive those who sin against us.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.
 For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
 and the glory forever. Amen.
 Amen.