

May 8, 2022
John 10:22-30
Sheep and Shepherd: Seeing as Each Sees
Michael Stanfield

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So, the Jewish leaders gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.’

Our little dog, Zoey is more overjoyed to see Janet and me whenever we enter the house than any human either of us has ever known – including each other – except maybe for our children when they were small. To Zoey, I am the person she can’t wait to see after returning home from a day at work. It is why my main prayer every day is “Dear Lord, please make me into the person my dog thinks I am.”

What makes a dog go insane with joy when seeing his or her human come through the door? What’s going on in that little dog brain and how can a wise owner take advantage of that loyal joy in a way that is good for both the dog and for the owner? To understand that, you’ve got to know something about the psyche of Dogs – something about their instincts as well as the way their desires have been shaped by thousands of years of close contact with human beings.

Our own Samantha George knows something about that. She is not only a dog lover but a dog trainer. And so is Cesar Millan. You may have heard of him and even seen him. From 2004 to 2012, he had a TV show called “The Dog Whisperer.” The show is in syndication and can still be watched on Disney Plus.

He and those behind the show commandeered the name from the popular 1998 Robert Redford movie entitled, “The Horse Whisperer.”

That film starred Scarlett Johansen in her first major role as Teenager Grace MacLean. Grace and her best friend Judith go out early one winter’s morning to ride their horses, Pilgrim and Gulliver. As they ride up an icy slope, Gulliver slips and hits Pilgrim. Both horses fall, dragging the girls onto a road and colliding with a truck. Judith and Gulliver are both killed, while Grace and Pilgrim are both severely injured.

Grace, left with a partially amputated right leg, is bitter and withdrawn after the accident. Meanwhile, Pilgrim is traumatized and uncontrollable to the extent that it is suggested he be put down. Grace’s mother, Annie played by Kristin Scott Thomas is a strong-minded workaholic magazine editor who refuses to allow Pilgrim to be put down, sensing that somehow Grace’s recovery is linked with Pilgrim’s.

Desperate for a way to heal both Grace and Pilgrim, Annie tracks down Tom Booker, a renowned horse trainer played by Robert Redford.

Annie says to Tom, “I’ve heard you help people with horse problems.”

After pausing to think about it, Tom replies, “Truth is, I help horses with people problems.”

And maybe that is what all compassionate trainers *really* do – help animals with people problems.

In today’s text, the religious leaders, in essence come to Jesus and say “We hear that you are the one who helps God and the Godly with people problems.” To which he replies, “Truth is, I help people with God problems created by people who think they are Godly.”

Jesus is the very first self-proclaimed whisperer, not of dogs or of horses but of people – *his* people whom he calls his sheep.

Jesus brings the news, unwelcomed by the Godly but a true gift to regular folks, that God can and is influenced by humans and human behavior – that God is willing to do whatever it takes to be in relationship with humans, including being changed by human contact – that God is all about the relationship. And for a relationship to be real and life changing the relationship has to be reciprocal.

Thus, Jesus is at the same time, People whisperer, Sheep whisperer, but also God whisperer.

In one of his stand-up routines, Jerry Seinfeld, observes that if an alien from another planet came and observed us humans following our dogs around waiting for them to do their business and then picking it up and taking it with them, which one of those two, the dog or the human do you think that alien would conclude is in charge of the planet?

And yet that is what Jesus whispers that God does for us.

It is both the essence of the grace offered by Jesus and the stumbling block it causes to those who think they already know what God wants – and to them, that certainly does not include a willingness to stoop to human behavior.

But Christ’s own – his sheep – *they* understand the lengths to which he will go and when *they* hear his voice, they are like a dog that sees its master upon his return home at the end of the day.

For Jesus, it was not about following a road to Godly perfection. It was about understanding what people need to be free – free to experience the joy of truly being in God: free to be healthy, hopeful and on the way to being fulfilled.

It is interesting that the same thing is true for dogs. Cesar Millan says that understanding what every dog wants and needs to be happy and healthy is the key. For a dog, he says, that is exercise, discipline, and affection (in that order).

Millan says one must understand *what a dog sees when he sees a human*. If you can make significant contact with an animal and how it experiences the world and help it act in its own best interests, you are on your way to becoming a whisperer.

“The moral of the story,” Millan says, “is no matter how much money or power you have, how many academic degrees or how many priceless works of art you own, *your dogs don’t care*. What they *do* care about is how unstable you are, because, being pack-oriented, it directly affects them.”

“Dogs,” he says, “know how comfortable you are with yourself, how happy you are, how fearful you are, and what is missing inside of you. They can’t tell you, but they absolutely know exactly who you are.” He goes on. “You can ask a human, ‘Are you happy?’ Many will say, ‘Of course’ — either hiding or unaware of the fact that they are not. Then you’ll see their dog. The dog can’t hide his emotions, and he’s *clearly* not happy. It becomes very obvious by reading a dog, how stable or unstable his human companion is.” And this is the clincher: Millan finally says, “Our dogs are our mirrors — but do we dare look into their eyes and truly see our reflections?” Cesar Millan, *Be the Pack Leader: Use Cesar’s Way to Transform Your Dog ... and Your Life* (Crown, 2007), 19.

Jesus comes with the radical news that *we* are God’s mirrors. That God sees the divine self in us.

Today’s gospel reading is not about dogs but about sheep. And sheep do not *appear* to be anywhere near as smart as dogs. It’s true: sheep have a reputation for being skittish, for following the herd and for not being all that bright.

But real shepherds, who work with sheep every day, don’t see it that way. They don’t believe that sheep are stupid. In fact, they argue that sheep may be among the more intelligent of the animals on the farm.

Take their brain size, for example they would say. If you put a human brain, a chimpanzee brain and a sheep brain on the table you’d be hard-pressed to tell the difference between them. Recent studies have shown that sheep actually have excellent memories and are able to differentiate between pictures of human faces up to two years after they have last seen them.

Good shepherds appreciate the intelligence of their charges, which is why they need to do some “whispering” with the sheep like Millan and Samantha do with their dogs. A good shepherd needs to understand what the sheep see when they see the shepherd.

Australian shepherd John Powell is one such “sheep whisperer.” After several years of drought reduced his flock and a snake killed his loyal sheepdog, Angie, John was faced with a dilemma: how to keep a herd of sheep in the most economical and minimalistic way.

After restocking his farm with some new lambs, John noticed that his daughter was feeding them willow leaves, which is apparently like giving chocolate to a candy-crazed toddler. Since John was always close by when his daughter doled out the treats, he noticed that as these lambs got older, they would follow him anywhere — even if neither he nor his daughter were handing out willow leaves. And once those older sheep became leaders of the flock and started to follow

John, the herd instinct of the other sheep kicked in and they would go wherever he and the leaders went.

Just by showing up and being recognized by the leaders of the flock, John is now able to herd as many as a thousand sheep at a time by himself with no help from dogs or motorcycles or any of the other things that other shepherds use to control sheep these days. It's a gentler way of shepherding that keeps the sheep calm and happy, and calm sheep tend to be better producers of wool.

It's all about knowing the sheep and *being known by them*.

No wonder that Jesus chose the image of a shepherd — a “sheep whisperer” — who knows his sheep intimately and is known by them. Of course, he wasn't the first to use this image. Leaders were often compared to shepherds in the ancient world. And Psalm 23 of course, compares God to a good shepherd whose whispering ability makes *all* the difference. God will make us to lie down in green pastures; God will keep us safe; God will make our enemies friends; God will restore our souls by God's presence.

The prophet Ezekiel compares the bad shepherd-kings of Israel who greedily “feed themselves” but not the sheep, with God who will seek the “lost,” bring back the “strayed,” bind up the “injured” and strengthen the “weak” as a good sheep whisperer would want to do, knowing that these are the keys to a healthy flock. To ensure that this is done well, God said that he would “set up one shepherd over them, my servant David” who shall “feed them and be their shepherd.”

That servant, *that* Good Shepherd, of course, is Jesus, who is both son of David and Son of God. In today's gospel reading, Jesus picks up God's critique of Israel's bad shepherds (in this case, the Pharisees), and expresses again what the Good Shepherd does: he knows and cares for the sheep even if it costs him everything, including his own life. “I am the good shepherd,” he says. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”

Unlike strangers and hired hands that treat the sheep like a mindless collective, exploiting them or running away when things get tough, the *Good* Shepherd is intimately and symbiotically connected with his flock.

It's no coincidence that Jesus once again brings up his sheep whisperer credentials during the festival of the Dedication (now known as Hanukkah) which celebrated the victory of the Maccabees over foreign Gentile invaders during the intertestamental period. The Maccabees had given their lives in defense of the nation and were fiercely devoted to God and the temple, doing everything in their power to preserve their people. Jesus was about to do the same, but on an even greater scale and for an even greater flock – one that would *include* Gentiles who were not yet part of the “fold”.

The Pharisees wanted Jesus to declare that he was the Messiah, but Jesus declares that he has already done so by revealing that he is the “shepherd” God promised through Ezekiel. As if that weren't enough, Jesus' “works” should have been testimony enough

The reason the Religious leaders didn't see it was because they were no longer sheep; they were not even dogs. They had become wolves in sheep's clothing. Hence, *they didn't recognize his voice, his manner, his care or his leadership*. What did these wolves see instead? They saw someone who was draining the loyalty of the people from them and to himself. They saw someone who was always taking potshots at their self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

In short, they saw a tasty lamb fat and ready for a kill. And Jesus was more than ready to lay down his life for his sheep.

As English shepherd James Rebanks says that the first rule of shepherding is: "It's not about you. It's about the sheep and the land." Jesus demonstrates this like no other. When the sheep see Jesus, they see a shepherd who has their best interests at heart, and they know it because he is willing to die for them.

We who are part of Jesus' flock have heard the voice of Jesus "whispering" to us.

And not unlike Jesus, we also have a shepherding task. We sheep have been changed by the shepherd into being more like him.

It happens, you know.

So, we are now under-shepherds who care for others as the Good Shepherd cares helping bring them into Jesus' fold where they can experience abundant, life.

To do that, we have to be willing to care for the sheep like Jesus does, to know what they need and to lead them well. Every one of us has a small flock we are given to tend, be it a family, a group of coworkers, a group of friends at school or even a small group at church.

What do our "sheep" see when they look at us?

We're called to hear the shepherd's voice and then, as leaders of the flock, to lead *them* in following *him*. We do that by reflecting his care — ensuring that people have the opportunity to be well-fed spiritually and physically; that we create an environment of peace where people feel valued, loved and cared for; and that we care about the flock more than we care about ourselves. When we do that well (and I happen to think that we do) others *want* to follow where we lead.

And *that* leads me to pray a prayer similar to my dog prayer – which is: "Lord, help me to be the pastor my congregation thinks I am."

And a good prayer for any of us would be, "Lord, help me to be the kind of sheep that leads others to the Shepherd."

Let us pray. Lord, help me to be the pastor my congregation thinks I am. And help us all to be the kind of sheep that lead others to the shepherd. Make us all sheep whisperers and God whisperers. In the name of the Shepherd we pray, amen.

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