

Presenting a Winsome Witness: The Life of the Flock

John 10: 1-10, Acts 2: 42-47

April 13, 2008

Over these last two years as your pastor I feel that you have really gotten to know me and my family – my wife Katie and our daughter Becca. But today I want to introduce you to a member of our family that you haven't met. This important member is our cat, "Cutie." Cutie has been with our family for almost two years, but I must admit that Cutie and I have yet to bond. He tolerates me to let him outside and fill his bowl with food. Katie hasn't had much more success either. For you see that Cutie only has eyes and a heart for Becca. Cutie follows Becca everywhere. He is completely devoted to Becca. Her voice immediately gets his attention and he loyally and affectionately follows her only. In fact one sight of me pretty much has him sprinting in the other direction.

Cutie in some ways reminds me of a dog with his physical affection for Becca. But he also reminds me of a kind of solitary sheep. More about that in a minute. The Sheep is perhaps the dominant animal metaphor in the Bible for people of faith. So it is important that we understand them a little bit so that we can also understand ourselves as people of faith. You know sheep are misunderstood creatures; we as people of faith are also misunderstood creatures. As some would say that sheep are really dumb creatures, followers of Jesus are also accused of being pretty dumb. But are sheep and followers of Jesus really that dumb? Sheep show an amazing dependence on their leader and each other. They show an amazing loyalty for their

very survival on the Shepherd and the rest of the flock. So for this the third installment on my series, *Presenting a Winsome Witness* I want to turn to our lectionary texts about the Good Shepherd and the early life of Christian community. What made them so distinctive to the world for the ways in which they lived? I want to tie their interdependence and the ways in which they relied on each other to the subject of evangelism and presenting the good news of the Christian faith. In a moment we will turn to our subject matter expert, Lary Barton, who will answer our third question of how do we bring in outside resources in presenting the gospel to visitors to our church.

But first I want to enter the “gate” of the sheep-pen to understand what Jesus is talking about in his “Good Shepherd” statements from the gospel of John. Shepherding was one of the dominant industries in Palestine and it remains quite prominent even today. Now sheep in Palestine are used primarily for their wool and not their meat so the relationship between sheep and shepherds is long-term. The days are spent wandering the arid pastures looking for grass upon which to graze. But at night the sheep return to the pen. Now in the cities and large towns these pens are community pens in which many flock gather with many shepherds. They are maintained under lock and key by a single gate-keeper. So how would you segregate the sheep in the morning? As Jesus indicates all of the sheep know their master and follow only him by the sound of his voice. They also have unique names and respond to their names if there is any confusion. But out in the wilderness there is a second kind of sheep-pen. These are smaller, simple walled units for a single flock. They are quite crude. In fact they don’t even have a gate. There is a simple

opening in the stonewall that is the “gate.” So how do the sheep not get out and wander around the wilderness? The Shepherd forms the gate with his own body, napping in the opening! So when Jesus said, “I am the gate!” they knew exactly what he meant. He says that whoever enters through him will be safe and that they’ll go in and out and find pasture and have life to its fullest. To go in and out and find pasture is an expression that we might not relate to very well. In our modern idiom I prefer the following translation: “if you come in through me into my flock at night you will find maximum *chill time*. There is peace and comfort and total safety under the care of the Good Shepherd. With this kind of safety we can experience peace that brings abundant living for all in the community.

Now isn’t that good news! Isn’t that the kind of communal living that all of us crave? So did the earliest Christian community find this kind of fellowship? As we turn to the book of Acts in our readings today we have somewhat of a cloudy picture of what this earliest community really looked like. Our text gives us one perspective. The earliest Christians (they weren’t even called that yet) “held everything in common...” This goes beyond sharing possessions. It was communal living. These early Christians were still Jews and worshipped with other Jews in the Temple. So they were respected in society and allowed to mix with others. But their true community was experienced in house worship with other followers. This is where they went beyond the requirements of the law to share everything in a kind of radical economy that was rooted in total trust in Christ, who was the good shepherd. At the same time this early flock was looked at as weird by the dominant culture. A man named Lucian writes the following:

The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day — the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account... You see, these misguided creatures start with the general conviction that they are [immortal for all time](#), which explains the contempt of death and voluntary self-devotion which are so common among them; and then it was impressed on them by their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, and deny the gods of Greece, and worship the crucified [sage](#), and live after [his laws](#).^[66]

What we also know about this early community is that it grew like wildfire. Why did this happen? There was intense persecution from time to time. They were viewed as weird by the outside culture. They had to sacrifice in many ways and shared their possessions in common. What would attract them to this faith? Why would they voluntarily become as “sheep?” Bible scholar William Barclay may have the answer. Barclay points out the answer in the language of our text. The Greek word *Kalos* connotes more than just goodness as the more common Greek word *agathos* suggest. *Kalos* is good in essence but it also looks good and is winsome to the world. That is how Luke describes early Christian community. They were not just distinctive in their practices and culture, but they were *Kalos*. They had the faces of angels. They depended on each other for the most basic of resources and the relied on the Holy Spirit to lead them in everything.

But how do you communicate that to someone who has not experienced that kind of fellowship? I told you I want to deal with this question of how to introduce resources from within the Bering fellowship to present this winsome witness. Let’s return again to our recording of Lary Barton to tell us how he brings in outside resources as the gatekeeper of his clients and his company.... Lary is a relationship

guy, that's for sure. He knows what he is good at and where he needs help. For his clients he like the Good Shepherd who brings in specialists so that they can go in and out and find pasture, right, Lary? He is the gatekeeper who experiences the Spirit of God in trusting his own instincts. Lary, it must be working!

It is important to find people in the church we can trust to help us in time of need. It is important to find resources among this church body who represent specialized gifts, people who the Spirit of God has equipped to do God's ministry in the world. Evangelism is one of the really important missions of the church. After all, we are just one or two generations from the extinction of the faith. I've been thinking a lot lately about how best to communicate the gospel to visitors with our own unique Bering personality. In fact we talked about this topic in-depth during our Disciple Bible Study on Thursday night. We decided approaching people telling them that they don't know when they will die so that they should give themselves to Jesus so that they don't experience eternal darkness is probably not the best way to go. The indirect approach of living faithfully and showing our lives to others is a better way to go. We must be patient to await the questions and interest that they will have. Trish King, our pastoral intern, has taught me that evangelism is very much about holy listening, as much or more as it is about speaking the gospel. The other important thing is understanding how God has uniquely gifted us to present our unique witness at the church at Bering.

One of the ways we do that is to be radically hospitable and to eat really good food. In fact on May 3rd we are preparing to offer the best \$5 breakfast in town at

our Spring Festival. Many of you know who have been here a long time that Spring Festival and the Pancake Breakfast is one of our best community traditions here at Bering. We used to have hundreds in our parking lot for this event. We'd like to return this great event to its glory days. And we can use your winsome witness in returning it to its past stature. In each of these envelopes we have ten \$5 entry tickets to the May 3 Spring Festival event. For those of you who feel called to help, during the time in which you come forward to receive the Eucharist, please take one of these envelopes at either side of the altar rail on the small table, sign your name, and spend the coming days prior to the event inviting friends to the best \$5 event in town. The price should not be an issue for anyone. The only question if you will step forward to do your part to invite people in a very non-threatening way to come and see Bering. We will have a great breakfast; we will have a terrific silent auction; we have activities for all ages; we will have tours of this beautiful Sanctuary; and it will be a gentle way for you to be a part of the continuing invitation that God makes to come and be a part of Bering Memorial United Methodist Church.