

“God’s Sheep”

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Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 30-31; John 10:11-15; Hebrews 13:20-21

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we praise You for You are the Maker of heaven and earth. You called the mountains into being and You also knit each of us together in our mother’s womb. We pray that as we study Your Word this morning that You would give us a renewed sense of wonder that You would call us to be Yours and that by Your Holy Spirit that You would grant us a wholehearted obedience to serve the God who made us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

What do the following have in common?

- The intense Ohio State fan with season tickets, body paint and crowd inciting skill to rival the actual cheerleaders.
- The housewife who refuses to buy cooking wares from any where but Williams-Sonoma.
- The high school guy who has a select group of online gaming friends.
- The elementary school girl with a premier collection of American Girl dolls.
- The college freshman who has just been inducted into the most popular sorority on campus.

What do all these people have in common? They have found somewhere to belong.

Psychologists and sociologists are keenly aware of the human need to have a sense of belonging. In 1943 Abraham Maslow developed a hierarchy of needs theory that any college intro to psychology class will teach you. He proposes that in order for humans to move towards mastery of a field, profession or skill and to take their innate abilities to the highest rungs of achievement they must have a place in their life where they feel loved and have a sense of belonging.

Folks in the advertising realm also know that after safety and basic physiological needs are met that, as humans, we all have an insatiable longing to belong and generally we are willing to meet this need in what ever form is offered to us. Marketing firms take full advantage of this propensity in human nature.

In his book *The Brand Gap*, Marty Neumeier presents five disciplines that help companies effectively create, cultivate, and protect their unique brands. In the process, he uncovers some interesting ways that corporate brands affect individual consumers:

Depending on your Unique Buying State, you can join any number of tribes on any number of days and feel part of something bigger than yourself. You can belong to the Callaway tribe when you play golf, the VW tribe when you drive to work, and the Williams-Sonoma tribe when you cook a meal. You're part of a select clan (or so you feel) when you buy products from these clearly differentiated companies.

Brands are the little gods of modern life, each ruling a different need, activity, mood, or situation. Yet you're in control. If your latest god falls from Olympus, you can switch to another one.¹

For some, the need to belong to the social elite will cause them to buy all the right stuff in order to belong to their club. Others want a place where they can be their selves and still be accepted, even if it takes a considerable amount of alcohol to achieve that goal. Some young women are willing to give their bodies away in casual relationships hoping that by doing so they might find the love and affection they so desperately crave.

From what or from whom do you gain your sense of belonging? Or is that still something you are searching after?

Knowing to whom you belong can make all the difference in the world. In Disney/Pixar's animated movie *Toy Story*, Woody (a plush toy cowboy), confronts Buzz Lightyear (a toy astronaut) with the fact that he is only an action figure and not really a space hero. Early in the movie Woody shouts, "You're not a space ranger! You're an action figure—a child's plaything." He does this because Buzz is unwaveringly preoccupied with completing his space mission. Woody is annoyed with Buzz's actions and is in many ways jealous of his cool features. Only after failing to fly, Buzz realizes the truth of Woody's statement. Grief-stricken and disillusioned, Buzz hangs his head in resignation, declaring, "I'm just a stupid, little, insignificant toy."

The scene I am going to show you picks up at this point. They are both trapped in the evil neighbor Sid's house. Sid is a kid whose hobby is to find cruel ways to destroy toys. If they don't escape they are both doomed to become spare parts for a toy Frankenstein. In this scene Woody seeks to comfort his friend by underscoring the love of the boy who owns them both. "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, and it's not because you're a space ranger; it's because you're his." As Buzz lifts his foot, he sees a label affixed to the bottom of his little shoe. There in black permanent ink is the name of the little boy to whom he belongs. Seeing the image of his owner, Buzz breaks into a smile and takes on a new determination.

As is the case with Buzz, having someone to belong to completely changes everything. We talked earlier about the other ways we can seek to satisfy that longing. Some of them are harmless, some are not. And while we all may have a number of groups or persons to whom we pledge allegiance, do they deserve our wholehearted devotion?

In this new sermon series we are starting today I'd like to propose that only by belonging to God can we ever satisfy our intrinsic need for security and love. Fan clubs might provide some fleeting joy and online forums can be a great place to share common interests, but our need to belong completely to another runs deeper than that.

In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, my only true comfort in life and in death is that I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus

¹ Marty Neumeier, *The Brand Gap* (AIGA, 2006), p. 41

Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.² These words from the Book of Confession beautifully describe how belonging to God is such an incredible reality. Belonging to God through His Son Jesus Christ bestows upon me more security, love, and comfort than anything or anyone on earth ever could.

Yet belonging to God changes everything. I am no longer my own. My skills are not my own. My time is not my own. My money is not my own. I can no longer do with my life whatever I want. Though in reality I was never my own in the first place. If I don't recognize that I belong to God, then my life will be spent serving the mini gods of my life. But the Living God is a jealous God. He won't share our affection with another. If we are going to belong to God, then we must be willing to give our whole self. This idea of belonging to God can best be understood by studying the metaphors that God uses in Scripture to depict the relationship between He and His people.

Today I'd like to spend our remaining time looking a little deeper at what it means to be God's sheep. As I searched the Scriptures for passages using this metaphor for God's people as sheep, the key thing I discovered is this: most often when this metaphor is used God is either speaking of His care for us as a Shepherd or stating how we, like sheep, have gone astray.

To understand what it means to be God's sheep, we must first know what it means for God to be our Shepherd. This is one of the tenderest images we have in all of Scripture to describe how God cares for His people. Most people gain their familiarity with this image through the words of the twenty third Psalm: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

We learn from this Psalm that God, who is our Shepherd, is the One who gives rest, who restores, who guides and who provides both in physical provision and in companionship.

Are you worn out or burdened? Our Lord the Shepherd can give you peace that passes all understanding. He can lead you to a place where you can find solace and reprieve. He will carry your burdens for you. In fact, He will carry you in His arms so you don't have to tread the rocky places on your own.

Have you fallen down or need a fresh start? A shepherd gently places his sheep on their feet again and takes measures to keep them away from falling prey to the same situations that got

² Book of Confessions 4.001

them there in the first place. A government agency can help you stand up again, but the Lord who is our Shepherd is the only One who can restore our souls.

Are you unsure which direction to head to find green pasture? Our Shepherd knows the terrain of our world and of our lives better than anyone else. Not only does He know which direction is best, but He will lead you there Himself.

We read earlier that Jesus said “I am the Good Shepherd.” He is even willing to give His life in exchange for us. Now that is a love worthy of our lives. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus also assured us that “I know my sheep and my sheep know me ...and they will listen to my voice.” (John 10:14-16).

Do you need help from the One who can do the impossible? Throughout all of Scripture our Good Shepherd is described as someone to whom we can call. Listen to these prayers from the Psalms: Psalm 28:9, “Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever.” Psalm 80:1-3, “Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.” The care that our Good Shepherd gives is certainly better than even the kindest of Bridge clubs can offer.

We have explored briefly what is given by our Good Shepherd when we heed His call to belong to His flock. He is the best of the best when it comes to Shepherds, but have you ever considered what is required of us as sheep in the Lord’s flock? In Woody and Buzz’s case being a good toy probably has something to do with simply being ready for hours of tireless play at a moments notice or having a high tolerance for baby drool when Andy’s younger sister comes around. Likewise, I think the ideal behavior for a sheep in God’s flock isn’t too complicated.

The most essential task a sheep has is to follow his or her Shepherd. The most common complaint of the Lord in Scripture regarding His sheep is that we have all gone astray. But once He has sought us out and brought us back to Himself, are you willing to stay close enough to the Shepherd to hear His voice and follow where He leads?

The Shepherd is always concerned with his sheep getting the nourishment they need. You would think that this would be straight forward enough. The shepherd leads the sheep to green pastures and still waters and the sheep go to town enjoying the bounty that has been supplied. Yet this is not always the case. My favorite book that gives insight into the shepherd/ sheep relationship is Phillip Keller’s *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. In his book he shares that sheep have a tendency to drink from muddy and fast moving water instead of lapping up the safe and healthy still water the Good Shepherd serves. A shepherd can do his best to provide good pasture lands, but the sheep can choose to go their own way instead, putting themselves in grave danger and starving themselves for no reason.

God has given us teaching from His Word to nourish us. Our Good Shepherd invites us daily to drink from the Living Water by meeting with Him in worship and in prayer. Do you feast on the

Good Shepherd's provision or do you delude yourself with unfound visions of seeking out other pastures?

The other response desired by our Good Shepherd is a posture of trust. Our Shepherd may need to lead us through unfamiliar territory or have us walk through the valley of the shadow of death. A posture of trust says, "I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." While the sheep still have enemies and fearful places to traverse, a quiet confidence is exhibited by the sheep who belong to the Good Shepherd.

Belonging to the right Shepherd makes all the difference in the world. In reflecting on his experience as a shepherd and as a sheep belonging to the flock of the Good Shepherd, Phillip Keller comments on the last line of the 23rd Psalm. From a sheep's perspective, this verse declares, "Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever." Phillip Keller writes:³

"It is with a sublime feeling of both composure and contentment that this statement, "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever," is made. "Actually what is referred to by "house" is the family or household or flock of the Good Shepherd. The sheep is so deeply satisfied with the flock to which it belongs, with the ownership of this particular shepherd that it has no wish to change whatever. "Sometimes I feel we Christians should be much more like this. We should be proud to belong to Christ. Why shouldn't we feel free to boast to others of how good our Shepherd is? How glad we should be to look back and recall all the amazing ways in which He has provided for our welfare. We should delight to describe, in detail, the hard experiences through which He has brought us. And we should be eager and quick to tell of our confidence in Christ. We should be bold to state fearlessly that we are so glad we are His. By the contentment and serenity of our lives we should show what a distinct advantage it is to be a member of His "household" of His Flock."

One of my constant prayers for us as a congregation during this time of transition is that the Lord would be our Shepherd every step of the way. Much like Israel, of whom we read in Ezekiel, who needed the special shepherding of the Lord when their human shepherds had gone away, we have needed the Lord to say "I myself will tend my sheep... Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they are my people." I have seen Him do this in so many ways and I am so very thankful for His provision and guidance.

Belonging to God changes everything.

Is the Lord your Shepherd?

"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 debts, as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever." Amen.

³Phillip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, p. 137-138.