

Well, let me begin with a word of gratitude. Thank you all for your prayers and support as my family and I made our way here. We're excited to be unpacking and exploring the area. The people are friendly, the food is delicious, and the heat is nothing compared to what we were dealing with! I am just thrilled to be with you.

In our scriptures today, we have images of sheep. In this idyllic landscape of Southern New England, there were likely many sheep at some point in history, but most of us have never owned or cared for sheep. Is that true? Raise your hand for me if you ever had a sheep either at your home or a relative's home.

So our lack of experience with sheep puts us at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding scriptures because sheep were extremely common in ancient Israel, and they appear quite frequently in the Bible. From King David's boyhood as a shepherd to images of sheep in the psalms and the prophets and even at Jesus's birth, there are sheep everywhere.

And I don't know about you, but throughout my life, well-intentioned pastors have spoken about sheep with disdain. They describe sheep as smelly, dirty, and about as smart as the wool sweater you wear here from October to . . . May?

There's not much love for sheep in sermons I've heard. They get lost easily. They get spooked easily. A bunny rabbit hopping around can spook a whole flock of sheep because they are defenseless. If they are very woolly, then they become top heavy, and odds are good that if they fall over, they won't be able to stand back up and will lie on their backs like turtles. They're just weak, helpless, unwise creatures desperate for a shepherd.

But something happened almost twenty years ago that completely changed my perspective, and I want to share it with you.

I had the privilege when I was in seminary of traveling to Turkey to see some of the places that were mentioned in the scriptures. Places where early churches were started and apostles like Paul and John corresponded back and forth. It was an eye-opening experience. I saw modern cities and ancient ruins. Mosques, synagogues, museums, and churches. I was transported back in time as I walked through archeological sites that brought first century experience to life.

I was especially fascinated by the fact that centuries old sites were exposed to all the elements and the wear and tear of tourism and day to day exposures. I realized that in just a few lifetimes, these historical sites could disappear. There are few fences and boundaries in the areas of Turkey we traveled. Livestock, stray animals, and people wandered around Roman-era columns. Buses pulled right up to amphitheaters and crumbling remains of markets. People touched and climbed on two-thousand-year-old columns as if they were children at a playground.

At one site, as we made our way down an old Roman road and imagined the scene as the earliest Christians experienced it, we came across an amphitheater, carved into a hillside. It was marvelous to sit on the stone seats and visualize the musicians and actors and theologians and philosophers who took the stage. I sat down and was having a moment. A real, tourist getting their money's worth moment, when it was rudely interrupted by a flock of sheep. They stumbled around the rim of the amphitheater, making an unholy racket, interfering with tourists and failing to use discretion when they needed to relieve themselves if you know what I mean. The shepherd was unembarrassed. This was normal for him. Just another day of getting sheep from point A to point B and another bus full of tourists taking pictures with the same Roman ruins.

But I'll never forget what happened next. As the flock moved away from where I sat, I tried to refocus and turned my eyes back to the amphitheater stage. There, about halfway down the steps, was a single sheep. It had managed to separate itself from the flock. Perhaps it was distracted by a clump of tempting grass. I'll never know why, but I wondered

what the shepherd would do to reunite the sheep with the flock. Would he call for it and personify in John chapter 10 that says, “I am the good shepherd. The sheep will listen to my voice and follow me.”? Ooooooh. How exciting would that be!?

But no. The shepherd didn’t call to the sheep.

Ooh, maybe he would literally leave the 99 to go and find the one like in Luke 15, put it on his shoulders and carry it back.

But no. He didn’t do that either. I chastised myself for being too naïve. It was the early 2000s. Perhaps he’d give a sharp whistle and send a stealthy border collie that I had not yet seen to drive that sheep up the steps and back to the shepherd like in the children’s movie Babe?

No again. There was no sheepdog to be found. What happened next, friends, was something even more astounding. The shepherd noticed the sheep that had gone astray and he gave some word of instruction and pointed his staff down the hill toward it, and a sheep from the flock began to make his way toward the lonely sheep, who was by now bleating anxiously. The sheep that had been sent by the shepherd had a bell around its neck, and as it picked its way down the rough stone steps, the bell jingled and jangled loud enough to be heard by tourists and vendors and the bleating sheep alike. The separated sheep, relieved to hear the familiar sound, became visibly excited and trotted up to meet its rescuer, and together they returned to the shepherd and the flock.

I had always been told that sheep were smelly and . . . let’s just say simple minded. Most preachers like to point out every time there’s a sheep mentioned in the scripture that we can assume the metaphor implies . . . a lack of academic giftedness. But this shepherd had trained a sheep to do search and rescue. To be a first responder. A semi-independent, conscientious, responsive assistant who served both the shepherd and the flock.

I have a small bell that I keep as a reminder of that day. It hangs by the light switch in my bathroom so that I see it every day, but as much as I try to keep the sheep and shepherd

metaphor physically in front of me, I have to tell you, I don't often like to think of myself as a sheep in a flock that is capable of doing any good. I am pessimistic about my ability and pessimistic about the potential of other sheep to rise above their lowly state.

I look around at the world and what I see is really depressing. I don't know where you all get your news, a website, a newspaper, a cable news network, but since we're speaking of sheep, do you know what a sheep's favorite social media platform is? Ewe Tube!

Now, I'm a strong proponent of limiting the power of social media and cable news, especially for children and teens, . . . and young adults and senior adults, and adult adults. Basically everyone. Because if you watch social media or cable news these days, you get the sense that life is really awful. Wars, poverty, crime, dysfunction, racism, anti-Semitism, climate change, women's rights, transphobia. Life is awful, isn't it?

And all of those things are real, and present, and people are suffering for all these reasons and more. We've shifted our attention from the pandemic to the war in Ukraine to the unfathomable horrors in Israel and now Gaza, we're in the midst of an historic election cycle. And we're in a time in history that is punctuated by mental health stresses and economic inflation stresses. There are many, many people in need of help. It can be overwhelming.

So what can we do? How do we begin to offer an alternative narrative that seeks to hope and help? How do we let the world know the Good News? How do we combat the fear that separates us from our neighbors?

The answer, I think is simple. I think we can find it in our scripture. And I like the way Eugene Peterson has translated it into modern language. His version of 1 John 3 says, "My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love." It goes on to say, "[Practicing love] is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality.

And how do we practice real love? Let's keep reading Peterson's translation. It says, "This is how we've come to understand and experience love: Christ sacrificed his life for us. This is why we ought to live sacrificially for our fellow believers, and not just be out for ourselves. If you see some brother or sister in need and have the means to do something about it but turn a cold shoulder and do nothing, what happens to God's love? It disappears. [It disappears.]"

So, when we see a vulnerable person in need of help, do we assume that the Good Shepherd will come to the rescue as I did that day in Turkey? Do we assume that God commissions us to run around like sheep dogs nipping at the heels of others and scaring them into submission? Or do we humbly acknowledge our own sheep-like qualities and in selfless love, step away from our own sense of security and comfort and be the approachable, familiar, gentle, fellow sheep who guides people back to the One who loves us all?

Maybe it needs to be as simple as that. Love humbly, serve faithfully, be a part of the flock, accept your sheepishness. Then love the flock you're with.

Loving the flock means not just loving the ones who made it through the narrow gate and into the pews today. It means loving the ones who didn't. It means that your life's work is to stay close to Jesus and pay attention to the way he watches over everyone. And when you notice him looking in the direction of one who needs help, you step up and help. You don't just pray for someone, you feed them. You don't just pray, you build. You don't just pray, you learn their name. You don't just pray, you head toward them with bell ringing and meet them where they are, and walk with them awhile.

My perception about my role in the kingdom of God changed on that hillside in Turkey when I heard the bell ring around the neck of the sheep that Jesus sent forth. We are not passive members of God's flock, we are called to serve one another. To do more than passively graze as the flock strays away, one by one. Put the bells on and head toward those in need.

Thank you all, for being here on my first day and for letting me share that experience with you. If you're wondering what kind of pastor I will be at Dunn's Corners, I hope this give you a glimpse. I look forward to serving with you. You seem like lovely, active, and smarter than average sheep, so go - love our flock and serve the Good Shepherd. Amen.