

A "Sheepish" Lenten Guide to Sheep, Shepherding, and Staying on the Path



2019 Six-Week Devotional Study
from the
Northern Illinois Conference
of The United Methodist Church
By Bishop Sally Dyck and Rev. Myron McCoy
Jane Rubietta, Editor

Table

of Contents



Intro pg. 3

How to Use this Guide pg. 4

Week one: Get Over it: We are Called God’s Sheep pg. 6

Week two: That Gets My Goat pg. 12

Week three: The Good Shepherd pg. 19

Week four: Shepherding: A Tale of Two Crowds pg. 26

Week five: He Knows Your Name pg. 34

Week six: Marching Off the Map pg. 38

About the Authors: pg. 44

About the Editor: pg. 45

Introduction:

By Bishop Sally Dyck

My brother and I had a little sheep-raising business when we were young, but shepherds, shepherding and sheep aren't part of everyone's experience. So, in 2017, I was surprised when the Northern Illinois Annual Conference approved an Annual Conference Shepherding Team (ACST) with corresponding District Shepherding Teams. (See www.umcnic.org/shepherding-team)



The Organizational Task Force designed these teams to help connect, coordinate and communicate ministry and mission throughout our annual conference as well as to vision and strategize for the future.

Some church consultants think that we should abandon all use of the word *shepherd* or even *pastor* (which means shepherd) because it's too passive and, dare I say, too serene for the rigorous tasks of ministry. Yet shepherding in the ancient near east (and other places) was hazardous, requiring a lot of courage to face the dangers of steep cliffs, wild animals in the wilderness, long lonely nights, and little social regard.

We hope that these Lenten devotions on sheep and shepherding lead to greater appreciation and application of an image deeply rooted in our scripture and tradition and our daily experience. Shepherding is really about leading and being led by God into some new "pastures" through some new paths. In the ancient near east, women and girls were shepherds, too! The image is not gender exclusive. Further, shepherding or ministry today isn't just one ordained person in charge. Rather, a team of clergy and laity working hard to care for souls and communities, with long hours and sometimes in difficult settings.

And so, the Rev. Myron McCoy and I, with Jane Rubietta, wrote these devotionals to spark conversations about ministry and leadership—laity and clergy—in our local churches. We hope that they will make you more aware of the Annual Conference and District Shepherding Teams, but mostly we want to re-cast a vision of what it means to be shepherds/leaders today!

Courage and Action:

We offer this as a Lenten devotional even though it does not have the traditional Lenten themes. Doing ministry within the life of our congregations and in our communities is a process of taking up the cross and following Jesus. To be a shepherd in our world and church today requires real courage and action.

To borrow from the Christmas story (Luke 2:3-20), I hope that while we shepherd together as clergy and laity in our streets and throughout the prairies of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference and “tend our flocks,” we will experience the presence and glory of God all around us. I also hope that we, like the shepherds at the birth of Christ, will glorify and praise God for all that God is doing in our midst!

How to Use this Guide:

Various tools at the end of each week’s reading provide plenty of fuel for discussion, prayer, and reflection both in a group as well as individually. In addition, the applications make it very simple for anyone to facilitate a small group.

After opening each session in prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to illuminate mind and soul and to create community in the group, consider reading aloud the opening scripture in unison. There is power in reading God’s words out loud.

As you work through the week’s devotion, share highlighted passages or places you were challenged, inspired, or convicted.

Spiritual Pyramid Practice:

Designed to lay a strong foundation for healthy spirituality, the Spiritual Pyramid Practices bring us into individual, corporate, and community balance. Adding in one practice per week, we move from personal growth to a faith that makes the world a place where Christ is real, his love accessible, and hope turns to reality.



Questions for Reflection:

The questions are ideal for the shepherding group to work through together, respectfully, taking care to invite everyone to speak, to contemplate, to share. Inviting discussion opens us up to possibilities beyond the words in front of us. We'll build community and see how the words translate into practice in our group, our lives, our churches.

Meditation:

Each scripture is chosen as a companion to the week's reading. Take time with the passage, allowing it to just steep in your soul. Read it aloud, and then wait with the words. Invite the Holy Spirit to speak into you through them, to highlight a thought or an action. What is God saying to you, based on the devotional itself and the passage from the scripture? What does God want you to?

Sheer Sheep:

Sheep have between 270-degree and 320-degree vision. With their eyes positioned on the sides of their heads, the only place they cannot seem to see is right in front of their faces. (True. Ever said that about anyone you know?!) In this section, either a fun or interesting word about sheep. There are good reasons we are compared to sheep in the scriptures!

Quote:

Each quote deepens the thoughts of the devotional reading. Ask yourself or in your group, "In what ways does this expand the reading? How do I apply this?"

Action:

This section moves us from the theoretical to the practical. What difference does this reading make, if it doesn't make a difference? What is God asking you to do, as a result of each Lenten reading? How will you put it into action?



GET OVER IT: WE ARE CALLED GOD'S SHEEP

WEEK ONE

By Bishop Sally Dyck

Know that the Lord is God.

It is (God) that made us, and we are (God's);

we are (God's) people, and the sheep of (God's) pasture. ~Psalm 100:3

Today people don't like to be called "sheep." The epitome of "fat, dumb and happy," sheep have a connotation of being passive and rather uninteresting. Who wants to be regarded as stupid or mindlessly led? But sheep have received a very unfair reputation, having become stereotyped as stupid, or as creatures that mindlessly follow along. Sheep are far smarter than we assume. Maybe as we understand sheep a little better, we will better understand ourselves as followers of Jesus, as well as the role of the shepherd as we seek to lead—laity and clergy alike.

NOT-SO-SILLY SHEEP

[A BBC report](#) points out that, though sheep are a very old species and common to most cultures around the world, we don't know very much about them. In fact, we have harbored inaccurate impressions of them. Sheep are far more complex and interesting animals than we give them credit for being. With complex social structures, they form long relationships of loyalty and care for other sheep in the flock. They have "pecking orders" or "butting orders" like other animals or birds, and they can become very competitive and even cruel to one another. And if you make a sheep mad, it might hold a [grudge](#) for two years! Just like humans, they experience both conflict and support within the flock.

Throughout the scriptures, as followers of the Good Shepherd, we are often regarded as sheep. But as is sometimes the nature of metaphors in the scriptures, we are also to take on the role of the shepherd—all at the same time. Metaphors have their limitations, but they can also help us imagine both the Divine and our response to God as the "sheep of God's pasture."

⁵ *Why are you cast down, O my soul,*

and why are you disquieted within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,

my help ⁶ and my God. (Psalm 42:5-6)

Scattered throughout the scriptures are references that would have been immediately associated with sheep and shepherding to the ancient near east. For instance, Psalm 42 has an implication or allusion of the shepherd and the sheep. The psalmist (attributed to David, a shepherd) cries out in hope that God will hear his cry and thereby lift up his spirits again: "Why are you cast down, O my soul?"

CAST DOWN



Sheep can be "cast down." "Cast down" is a term used when a sheep has turned over on its back or fallen and it can't get up again by itself. Usually a cast sheep is "stressed" by its weight, caused by its flesh and/or wool. In order to find relief, the sheep may lie down in a hollow or depression in the ground and when it moves about, it shifts its center of gravity so as to roll over on its back with its feet in the air. In this position, it can begin to suffer

from a lack of blood circulation to its feet and especially with extreme weather conditions, it can die quickly in its distress. (*A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, Phillip Keller, pp. 30-32). Struggling with its feet in the air, flailing away, bleating and agitated, needing desperately the help of the Good Shepherd, the cast sheep is in critical condition.

Churches can become "cast down" these days. What worked for us in the past no longer works. Or we've gotten comfortable, rolled over on our backs and forgotten how to listen to our community. Or forgotten how to share our faith. Or we aren't practicing our spiritual disciplines. Or we aren't remembering who we are and looking forward to who God is calling us to be. Or there is conflict about something (often divergent visions of who God is calling us to be as a church). Or acknowledging that many people just aren't interested in church, no matter how scintillating our preaching, dynamic our worship, and outstanding our music.

We become "cast down," flailing in our attempts, unsure whether there is any hope for us and losing sensation in how to reach out. This may be the experience of any given local church or the religious landscape of America; either way it is easy to become "cast down."

CAST SHEEP NEED A SHEPHERD

In times like these, when we are cast down, we need shepherding. But shepherding isn't only the work of the clergy. It's the work of the clergy and laity team. Together clergy and laity do the work of either righting the "cast sheep" and/or hopefully preventing the congregation from being "cast down."

Through the shepherding or leading of the clergy and laity team, we do those things that a shepherd once did, including finding “green pastures” and “still waters” to refresh and restore our souls.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;

teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,

for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,

and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,

for those who keep his covenant and his decrees. ~Psalm 25:4-10

Another allusion to sheep and shepherding comes from the psalms: paths of righteousness or goodness. The psalms were written in an agrarian time, and people would have immediately envisioned the trails throughout the surrounding hills and mountains where sheep made a well-beaten path. We might think “stuck in a rut,” but these paths led animals to life-giving places; places to water and graze. These paths or trails are like habits or practices that are life-giving, healing and hopeful.

LIFE-GIVING PATHS

These life-giving habits are part of the calling of the shepherding or leadership team of a church. The team is responsible for making sure that all who take the vows of membership—giving their prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness—receive what they need in order to become disciples who learn and practice to pray, be present, give, serve and provide witness. Too often the vows of membership are viewed one way—what the new member will *give*—instead of two ways—what the (new) member will also *receive* from the church in order to fulfill the vows of membership as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Northern Illinois Annual Conference's priorities include equipping local churches to grow in discipleship, reach out to new people, and engage our communities. A congregation grows in discipleship by providing the pathway—a discipleship system—that doesn't keep us as spiritual infants but facilitates growth throughout our years and experiences. Without that intentionality in our churches, people will become like sheep who aren't given the green pastures to feed on and the still waters to drink from that make us healthy and strong. Pathways lead us to food and drink; without them, we starve, and the church atrophies.



Several years ago, I developed a Spiritual Pyramid: a simple, visual way to think about our spiritual health. Too often my own spiritual health isn't what it should or could be because I'm not "feeding" on all the practices that make for a strong soul. Like the food pyramid, it's meant to be balanced in our "diet" of spiritual activities; not too much of one (that we really, really enjoy) with none of another (which is beyond our comfort zone).

During each week of Lent, we will focus on a different section of the Spiritual Pyramid for application. When you think about your faith practices, how do they add up in each of the categories of the pyramid? Notice that some are foundational and others are built on a solid foundation. Shepherds want their sheep fed and watered and in safe pasture. If you feel stuck in a rut, ask the Shepherd to lead you into a new path toward goodness. As the Psalmist asks,

*"Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
 teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me."*

WEEK ONE SPIRITUAL PYRAMID PRACTICE: DAILY HABITS OF PRAYER AND BIBLE STUDY

Practicing daily habits of prayer and Bible study is essential—the vital foundation of our spiritual lives. These daily habits are like the trails or paths that the sheep take from one place of “still waters” to another. An intentional discipleship process is shepherding at its best, keeping people on the pathways that lead to “righteousness” (we don’t always like that word) or goodness, and growth in our spiritual lives.

In the pyramid, personal prayer and Bible study are foundational to our spiritual health, much like drinking water is essential—even more so than food—in order for us to be healthy. If we want to grow in our faith and be healthy, we need to do our own personal Bible study and prayer. There are so many resources to assist us in our Bible reading. There are so many different ways to pray besides that which we learned in preschool Sunday School (“bow your heads, close your eyes and fold your hands”). Find a method of prayer that speaks to you and connects you to God. As you study and pray, you’ll be laying that solid foundation from which spiritual practices and outreach are built.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When have you experienced the helplessness of being “cast”? Whether flipped on your back from stress or the weight of life? How have you gotten back on your feet spiritually?
2. How strong and daily is the foundation of your faith? What are your daily practices of prayer and Bible study?
3. What do you need from your church in order to “give your prayers...” and to grow in your study of the Bible?
4. When people take the vows of membership in your church, what intentional discipleship pathway could they access with some assurance that it will lead them to a growing faith?

MEDITATION

*Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help and my God. ~Psalm 42:5-6*

SHEER SHEEP

Sheep always need new pastures—they eat between four and six pounds of food per day! How much spiritual nutrition do you need per day?

QUOTE

No longer can we afford to confuse finding our way with knowing where we're going. The destination is not always the point of the journey—how we travel is critical. Who are we, en route to only-God-knows-where? If we trod the path of righteousness, then the journey is about becoming the best self ever...On this long and rugged trail, we learn to pace ourselves, to find our way, one day at a time. We hold tightly to Jesus, who will never allow life or circumstances to snatch us from his hand. And we try to offer our other hand to someone needing a path through pain and into purpose. ~Jane Rubietta, *Finding Your Way*

ACTION

Choose a method of prayer this week that connects you to God, and focus there daily. Invite God to clearly direct your path each day.



THAT GETS MY GOAT: SHEEP, GOATS, AND STICKING TOGETHER

WEEK TWO

By Bishop Sally Dyck

31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. **32** All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, **33** and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. **34** Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; **35** for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, **36** I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' **37** Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? **38** And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? **39** And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' **40** And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' ~Matthew 25:31-40

Growing up on a farm, I've experienced both sheep and goats, and goats may seem more interesting than sheep. There are significant differences between the two species. Perhaps the biggest difference is that goats are "browsers" and sheep are "grazers." Goats are far more independent, heading off on their own to forage for food. That makes them difficult to herd. In fact, they herd *themselves* going and doing whatever they please.

This may have been underscored when a herd of goats escaped recently from a farm called "We Rent Goats" in Boise, Idaho. I have no idea why anyone would rent a goat, but evidently there is some demand for them. These goats found a way through the fence and out into the tony front lawns, backyard gardens, and city green places. There's a saying that if your fence can't hold water, it won't hold goats! Goats are notorious for escaping and usually doing a fair amount of damage.

GOATS ON THE GO



If goats were human, we might describe them as impulsive or suffering from an attention disorder. They will flit from munching on a twig to a nearby low-hanging branch to a tin can to jumping on your car in a matter of moments! In no time the goats were everywhere in Boise. Rounding them up must have been a major task. It wasn't four or five goats, but 118 all going every which way, nearly impossible to herd back onto the farm!

Sheep largely stick together in a flock because they are social animals. They feel protected and cared for together rather than separated. Occasionally a lamb or a sheep may wander off but usually because it has become cast down, or while grazing lost sight of the others. A shepherd can go after lost lambs, leaving the flock behind with fewer shepherds or a sheep dog, because the flock won't scatter like goats.

When Jesus told this parable in Matthew 25:31-40, lifting up the sheep over the goats, I wonder if there's something about the nature of the *flock* rather than the sheer independence of the goats. The goats are off doing their own thing as their impulses direct them. The sheep stay and move together. Could these be clues as to how we are to be in mission, together? Not just as independent, isolated individuals, or even local churches in ministry and mission, but connected, and thereby far more effective in our ministry and mission?

When it was much easier to be a church (in any of our communities), we could happily "graze" without much cause for concern. Every church or, for that matter, every clergy could do whatever we felt led to do, and usually by ourselves. We grazed without receiving much direction from the annual conference or district, without working with surrounding churches and their clergy, and without partnerships with other ecumenical churches or non-profits in our communities. In our current culture, there are many churches and clergy who still are "lone rangers," or dare we call them "goats"?

POTENTIAL PITFALLS

One potential pitfall in our spiritual lives and our congregations that can cause us to become "cast down" is to rely solely on ourselves. Without the accountability of the community or flock, we can easily get separated or stray. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently wrote about our focus on self. He pointed out that with individualism comes "anxiety, loneliness and depression." He writes,

The Talmud tells the story of a rabbi who was a faith healer. All he had to do was lay his hands on someone and they were cured. Then he fell ill and called for a friend to come and heal him. Why couldn't he cure himself...because a prisoner cannot release themselves from prison. Sometimes self-help isn't enough. It needs the touch or the word of an other.

That's why community is so important. It's where we meet face to face and give each other strength. It's where people know who we are, and miss us when we're not there. Community is society with a human face. It's the redemption of our solitude. ~Source rabbisacks.org

The priorities of the Northern Illinois Annual Conference include equipping local churches to make disciples, share the faith with others, and reach out to our communities. And there's strength in supporting, even healing, each other. Our priorities also include addressing issues of low clergy morale. Clergy suffer from low morale for many reasons, but often because they are lonely and isolated. Likewise, local churches are lonely, feeling like they are the only ones going through the struggles in the present religious landscape. Isolation can be deadly. We need to be more like sheep than goats!

SHEEP MEET: FIND A TEAM

Across our Conference are various configurations of ministry where sheep meet and work together, as churches and as clergy—in rural, urban and suburban settings. Each configuration is different. In some, the clergy meet for support, resourcing, and problem-solving. Some churches come together to provide essential ministries to the community, such as pooling human and financial resources to provide after-school programming. Others work as a cluster or hub, especially in rural communities, to maximize what they can do together as opposed to being isolated and fragmented in ministry. I would hope that we would have all kinds of configurations of how clergy meet and support each other and how congregations work together.

In a recent meeting with new clergy, I said, "Find a team!" The same is true for laity. Community, as Rabbi Sacks said, is the redemption of isolation. When the district superintendent or the "annual conference" puts clergy or local churches together, it rarely works. But when a couple of churches or clergy decide to get together with a stated purpose, it usually works pretty well.

FLOCKS TOGETHER

Don't let the gathering become a gripe session. The author of Hebrews wrote, "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another..." (Hebrews 10: 24-25, NIV).

Make the gathering an opportunity to plan worship, problem solve with each other, and, yes, sometimes serve and worship together as congregations. Marty Linsky, author of *Leadership on the Line*, once consulted with the Council of Bishops. He offered a helpful process in problem solving. It goes like this:

1. In a small group of 4-6, one person presents a dilemma that s/he is having in ministry. Someone is a timekeeper and everyone listens without interruption for 5 minutes. Then the timekeeper allows 10 minutes *only for questions*; no discussion, no solutions, only questions to clarify the dilemma that the presenter has.
2. Then the presenter turns his or her back to the group which is in a circle around him/her, and listens to the group try to diagnose the problem(s) for 20 minutes. Diagnosing is different from fixing; it's the wondering of what is going on. The presenter says nothing while the others wonder out loud about what's happening, what they don't know, what interpretations (plural) might they make, what might others involved in the dilemma be thinking or feeling (as opposed to just the presenter) and anything else that could help diagnose the dilemma. I have found it's very helpful to take lots of notes while listening with my back turned to the others as they are diagnosing and interpreting.
3. Then the presenter turns back to the group and with the group comes up with as many ideas for action steps as possible. This is actually the only time that "solutions" are discussed (without getting into the weeds about them) and only for 5 minutes. So it has to be a "speed dating" type, idea-generating time. The more the better and as Marty said, brilliant or ridiculous!
4. Finally, the presenter reflects another 5 minutes on what he/she learned, any insights or actions to take.

Good communication in churches and among leadership is rare, as are true dialogue, discourse, and discussion. I encourage clergy in particular to get together for this kind of support and reflection. Usually it's pretty energizing for everyone in the group and everyone benefits in some way, especially if the contexts for ministry are similar. I can't stress enough: *Find a team!* Be a flock that supports one another through an active listening process like this.

Through this listening discourse, we begin to dream, to get past our obstacles and build community. And when it comes to outreach and engaging our communities in mission, today more than ever, it takes working together. Together, we can feed the hungry, provide clean water for the thirsty, welcome immigrants and refugees into our midst, give clothing and supplies to those who have lost them through natural disasters, reduce deaths from malaria, and change the systems that form a pipeline from cradle to prison in some communities. In other words, it takes all of us working together to be in ministry and

mission in our communities and around the world. Clergy together, congregations together, as a district or with other districts, ecumenically and with other partners. Remember: sheep (together) “get ‘er done”!

JOURNEY OF A BUCKET: MANY HANDS MAKE MIRACLES

It takes all of us to make a difference, and not just “two people and a truck” taking off into flood or disaster-struck areas with supplies to get ‘er done. For instance, many United Methodists have responded to the call for flood buckets after a hurricane or flood anywhere in the country or beyond. *New World Outlook* (Spring 2018, pp. 28-32) describes the “journey of a bucket.”

Countless hands contribute to one flood bucket. From June 1 to November 1, 2017, during the hurricane season, 17 storms lashed the Atlantic coast, affecting the U.S. and Caribbean Islands. While the distribution centers keep a stock of flood buckets, they are quickly depleted in a year with so many storms. A call went out and soon United Methodist hands began to buy a 5-gallon round bucket. Hands bought the exact 14 different items on the cleaning kit’s list. Maybe different members of a family picked them out in the store. Hands took them to church and made complete cleaning buckets from the items that were brought in.



Hands drove the trucks to get the buckets to Sager Brown Depot in Baldwin, LA or the Midwest Distribution Center in Pawnee, Illinois. Hands inspected and sorted them in order to make sure that the buckets had exactly the right items and were uniform. Hands distributed them to the various locations that suffered from storms and flooding. Hands used them to clean homes and churches and other places destroyed by storms.

During the 2017 hurricane season, 31,000 cleaning buckets were shipped out of the UMCOR distribution centers along with 250,000 hygiene kits and nearly 90,000 school kits as well as smaller quantities of sewing, layette, bedding and birthing kits. We can’t even imagine or estimate how many hands touched all those kits to make a difference in so many peoples’ lives.

No one set of hands did it all! But together, hands across the United Methodist Church faithfully answered a call to care for our neighbors. No one pair of hands could have that much impact and make that much difference for communities in need. What we do together is sustainable; we provide cleaning buckets and

other responses to those in need year after year after year. We would grow weary in doing good if we had to do it alone.

The common flood bucket is just one example of the scope and scale of what we do better together than alone as the United Methodist Church. In a critical time in the life of our church, remember that our scope and scale of ministry and mission has been built on working together, not alone.

Goats stray off on all sorts of tangents. But the flock of sheep “get ‘er done.”



WEEK TWO SPIRITUAL PYRAMID PRACTICE:

SERVICE IN THE CHURCH

Service in the church is distinct from serving the community. Just as everyone in the family has chores to do to keep a household going, so we all need to pitch in and help with the work of the church to keep it healthy and strong. Service within the church includes being on finance committees or teaching Sunday School. Some people can imagine themselves doing one but would be aghast at the thought of doing the other. Service in the church is a calling/ministry, drawing upon our spiritual gifts. What is it that you do or could do in matching your gifts, skills and interests in serving your church? It is all part of Jesus telling Peter, “Feed my sheep.”

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When has isolation rendered you vulnerable? What have you done to combat that isolation?
2. Rabbi Sacks said that "Community is the redemption of solitude." How have you found that to be true?
3. How have you seen the fracturing of community in your church? How has it hurt the church? The community? Your faith? Your calling? How can you invite real discourse and discussion that lead to understanding?
4. What group project might you get involved in, such as the "Flood Buckets"?

MEDITATION

¹⁵ When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

¹⁶ Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

¹⁷ The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. ~John 21:14-17

SHEER SHEEP

Predators isolate a sheep to attack it. Sheep stick together, banding together for protection.

QUOTE

God says about us in the Bible: "it's not good to be alone." A good society is a community of communities. Not just an array of selves.~ [Rabbi Sacks](#)

ACTION

Experiment with the Problem-Solving Technique. Invite 4-6 people into a group and work through Linsky's instructions. How does this build unity among you?

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

WEEK THREE

By Bishop Sally Dyck

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. ¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father." ~John 10:11-18

When I served as district superintendent in Ohio, a series of my churches were all built about the mid-1800s. Their architecture was similar but more strikingly, they all had the same two stained-glass windows, designed and installed by a German artist.¹

One window, somber in dark grays and deep purples, depicted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knelt before a big rock in anguished prayer. Undoubtedly, generations of people prayed and found comfort in front of the window of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.

One church's window featured Jesus as the Good Shepherd with a lamb in his arms. Other sheep obediently followed him through a lush, sunny green valley. A look of peace, even joy, covered Jesus' face as he triumphantly returned with his lost lamb and flock intact. If you looked closely, the sheep almost seemed to be smiling! All peaceful, calm and serene, this Jesus the Good Shepherd with his flock.

But this peaceful, calm and serene scene didn't seem to connect to the experience of life that most of the folks in those churches were having at that time. The economy was killing these small towns where the

¹ Adapted from the May 2018 *Reporter* article by Bishop Sally Dyck.

churches were. A man in one congregation was furious with others in the church because they took their hardware business to the Walmart in the larger town nearby. He publicly accused them of putting him out of business. Those sheep weren't smiling.

The older congregants' lambs were lost; many of their own children and grandchildren had nothing to do with the church. If they did, they went to church in the larger town nearby; usually a non-denominational church. The flock was fighting about who was to blame and instead of smiling, these sheep were butting heads.

SHEPHERDING AT THE EDGE

I was reminded of a different picture of the Good Shepherd from my youth. Painted by Alfred Soord well over 100 years ago, this is no peaceful, calm or serene setting for the Good Shepherd. The tension and danger are palpable. The shepherd has left the lush, level ground for the mountainous cliff in search of a lost lamb. The man holds precariously onto his staff. An eagle circles overhead, trying to snatch the lamb in order to have a tasty kabob for dinner.

The Soord painting leaves the viewer in suspense: what will happen? Will the shepherd fall or fail to get to the lamb before it falls onto the rocks below or is snatched away by the circling eagle? Will the shepherd and lamb return safely to the fold? The scene isn't resolved and the viewer contemplates what it's like to be both the lamb (so close to disaster) and the shepherd (precariously seeking the lost lamb).



LOST LAMBS

Shepherding isn't for the faint-hearted. It requires physical, mental and even spiritual strength to climb mountains, hang off cliffs, be acutely aware of predators and rescue the lost lambs. When we talk about shepherding in the church today—laity and clergy—this image of the shepherd tells the story. As in Soord's painting, today we are left in suspense as to what the church will be in this new religious landscape; a real cliffhanger.

We also find ourselves in communities of all kinds where there are more “lost lambs;” people who are marginalized economically, socially, and spiritually. The familiar parable of the lost sheep is close to home.

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”³ So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ~Luke 15:1-7

The writer of the gospel of Luke tells three parables in chapter 15; the first parable is about the lost sheep. The parables are directed at the tax collectors and legal experts listening to him and they aren’t happy. They are grumbling because Jesus isn’t acting like they think he should. He’s welcoming sinners and eating with them! He’s reaching out to the lost lambs and sheep instead of judging and condemning them.

Shepherding requires going after the lost sheep. Who are the “lost sheep”? Too often we think they’re the members who are more interested in golfing on Sunday morning, or people who have a beef with the pastor, or confirmands who thought they had graduated from church. Yes, we need to reach out to those who are disenfranchised from the church for whatever reason.

REACH OUT

But we are also called to reach out to people in our community who need Jesus and perhaps a helping hand. Included in our priorities as an annual conference are equipping local churches to grow in discipleship, reaching new people, and engaging our communities. All of the priorities are ways to reach out to the lost sheep.

The shepherd who went in search of the lost sheep had to listen carefully to locate the sheep. In shepherding or providing leadership to grow in discipleship, reach new people and engage our communities, we begin by listening to the needs of people. As shepherds/leader, we can’t just set off on a path that we prefer, providing a solution for someone else’s “problems” that aren’t needed or wanted. Instead, we must listen carefully to what people say about who they are and what they need in order to

grow in their faith, risk becoming a part of a faith community, and/or meet the needs of people in the wider community.

LISTENING AT THE EDGE

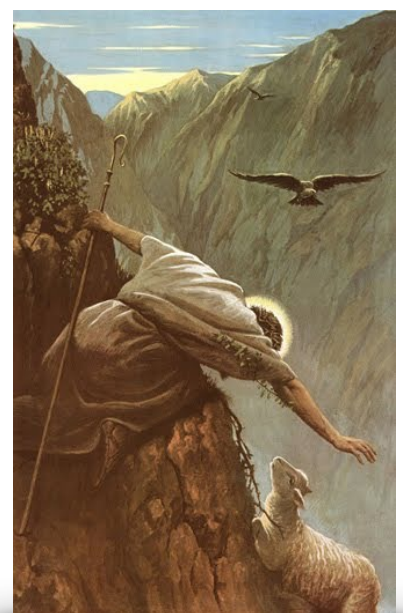
Going back to Soord's painting of the Good Shepherd, the shepherd couldn't have seen the lamb so he had to listen. Then when he followed the lamb's cries, he had to go to the edge of the cliff to even see the lost lamb. Ministry involves going to the edges. What is breaking the hearts of people in our churches and in our communities where the gospel of Jesus Christ and the faith community can make a difference? Those aren't easy places to go, and often reveal painful stories. On the radio or TV, sometimes we hear the commentator say that a news story will have graphic descriptions or images and parental discretion is advised. When we really go to the edges of the lives of people in our churches as well as the community, it may be difficult for us to listen to the pain and it requires deep listening and mature faith. But that's what it means to be a shepherd, to be in ministry as a layperson or clergy.

As Mr. Rogers said, "If you really want to communicate, the most important thing to do is to listen."

The shepherd in Soord's painting didn't just go to the edge. He went over the edge. When we say that someone has gone over the edge, we usually mean that they have really gone to the extreme.

Shepherding our congregations and communities means that we go "over the edge," providing *radical* hospitality and *abundant* grace. In going over the edge in ministry, we demonstrate Jesus' *unconditional* love, mercy and justice.

But in Soord's painting, the shepherd does more than go over the edge, he reaches out from there. If you look carefully, you can see that it's not even possible for him to hang onto his crook at that angle but he does. He does the impossible! He hangs onto the shepherd's crook, which I believe in this painting could represent the cross itself as we trust in the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus said that we would do greater things than he did (John 14:12). Is that possible? Mary, the mother of Jesus, said that nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37). And what seems to be impossible on our own is possible with God and each other.



WHO ARE YOUR LOST LAMBS?

For most of us, the “lost lambs” aren’t in some other country or place, but are people we know and love. You undoubtedly have people you love in your life who are going through a difficult time, and perhaps question whether the Christian faith is relevant. Your heart must break for them.

What if you have a conversation with someone like that in your life? Not to convince them to go to church, or to straighten them out, but to learn from them and to care for them. Missionaries sent to another country learn the language of the people. In order to better share the grace of Jesus with others, we need to understand what they’re saying to us about God or the church—their experiences and perceptions of it. This is an opportunity for you to find out what they think and feel about their lives, about God, and about the church. Like the Shepherd in Soord’s painting, may we go to the edge, hear the sheep’s cries, and extend the cross.

WEEK THREE SPIRITUAL PYRAMID PRACTICE: SERVING IN OUR COMMUNITIES

We are called to *serve our communities* and reach out to others. This is distinct from serving one’s own church. We all are called to reach out and engage our communities (local, national or even international). When we give our service through a mission project or an ongoing outreach, we encounter our neighbor(s) in a new way. We work side by side with others in our church or churches near us or people in our community to better know, and hopefully love, our neighbors near or far. Our congregation may become known for its service to its community such as some of our NIC churches who participate in PADS or Bare Necessities (providing personal hygiene products for people).



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. List your regular involvements and commitments. Which of them are specifically about serving in your community?
2. We all have excuses and reasons for not being involved in efforts to bring the Good News outside the church. What are yours?

3. What do you do on a regular basis to engage your community as part of your fulfillment of the vow to give your “witness”?
4. If you could serve in any way, what would be the best meshing of your gifts and the needs and opportunities around you?

MEDITATION

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. ~Hebrews 13:20-21

SHEER SHEEP

A sleeping shepherd and a thousand sheep, lost and found.



[Watch here](#)

QUOTE

“More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It is a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it is not as simple as it seems. My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It is difficult not to have plans, not to organize people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn’t be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them.” ~Henri Nouwen, ¡Gracias! A Latin American Journal

ACTION

A great Lenten activity would be for a group of people to have a “lost lamb” conversation. Remember to “go over the edge” with extreme graciousness, to listen and not argue. Some questions could be:

- How would you describe yourself religiously or spiritually?
- What gives you meaning in your life?
- If you went to church when you were younger, what was the turning point?
- Why did you quit altogether or stop attending regularly?
- If you never went to church regularly, what is your impression of it?

- What disappoints you about the church?
- When have you seen the church at its best?
- What would you wish to tell the church?

Follow the questions where they lead, but remember: these conversations are for listening. No guilting, scolding, or begging allowed! I asked a group of mostly older adults to do this once. Most of them did it with family members—grown children or grandchildren, nieces or nephews. It was difficult for people to just listen and ask more questions but when they did, they were surprised at how open their family member or friend was to talk (when allowed to do so without argument, judgment and interruption)!

For whom would you go “over the edge” and reach out from there, in your Christian outreach?

How might this image of shepherding and lost sheep guide your ministry? Both personally, and as a church?



SHEPHERDING: A TALE OF TWO CROWDS

WEEK FOUR

By Rev. Myron McCoy

All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "We are your own flesh and blood. ² In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns. And the Lord said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'" ³ When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. ⁴ David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. ⁵ In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. ⁹ David then took up residence in the fortress and called it the City of David. He built up the area around it, from the terraces inward. ¹⁰ And he became more and more powerful, because the Lord God Almighty was with him. ~2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. ² When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. "Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? ³ Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴ Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." ⁵ He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. ⁶ He was amazed at their lack of faith. Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. ⁷ Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over impure spirits. ⁸ These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. ⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. ¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. ¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² They went out and preached that people should repent. ¹³ They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. ~Mark 6:1-13

In life, few things are as unreliable as a crowd. Athletes are cheered one minute and booed the next. Celebrities are hailed one day and hauled out the next. Politicians watch their poll numbers rise and fall.

TWO CROWDS, TWO SHEPHERDS

Today's readings depict one group of people accepting David as their shepherd/king, and in the other passage we find a group that did not take Jesus seriously as shepherd/spiritual leader. In one place, order and allegiance are exemplified. In another place, rebellion and revenge rule. Among one people are words of love and life. Among another people, cries of hate and death.

Our scripture in Second Samuel in many ways constitutes an amazing widespread acceptance and endorsement of King David's leadership and reign. It suggests that David was the overwhelming consensus choice of the people in both the North and the South, with the largest inaugural gathering ever. All sounds so laudatory that one could easily be left with the impression that, from the time of his anointing by Samuel, David's rise to the throne was a straight line without a hitch. To be fair, David's story stretches through many chapters of scripture and is far more human than today's scrap of a royal chronicle.



Blood was shed, more than we like to remember, some at the very hands of David. And, even though we elevate King David, and celebrate his becoming one of Israel's outstanding symbols of unquestioned leadership, the whole of writings concerning him does not always glamorize his kingship. David's weaknesses and sins, and those of his successors, fill the scriptural accounts, and could provide more than ample fodder for Entertainment Tonight, late-night talk shows, and Congressional hearings.

In I Samuel 8:10-22, God warned the people about the danger of having their own king (and I must say, we do well to heed the warning today). While a king's charter ought to be the welfare of the citizens, many kings quickly alter the charter to make themselves their first concern, with an agenda of enriching themselves. David was not exempt from this, and names like Uriah, Bathsheba and Absalom shall forever be linked with his name along with the obvious blessing of his psalms. A pattern of fragility emerged at the height of David's kingdom, a fragility marked by fraternal strife between the northern and southern parts of the kingdom. That strife led to a final dissolution of the kingdom forever, after the reign of his son, Solomon.

OUTRIGHT REJECTION

In the Mark text, amidst the other crowd, we do not find a ringing endorsement of loyalty for Jesus. In the hometown base, persons would have heard news of Jesus' spectacular miracles. He healed, drove out demons, and delivered compelling messages that attracted many.

Back at home in Nazareth on the Sabbath, Jesus opened the scriptures in the synagogue, teaching with great authority. Great authority! While many in the crowd were amazed for about a minute (see Mark 6:2), and in spite of Jesus' successful road swing in the bordering towns, the folks' response is one of deep offense and outright rejection.

We might call Nazareth some "Podunk town." In this town-folk/kin-folk/church-folk kind of hamlet that is Nazareth, persons failed to acknowledge or recognize God at work in Jesus. They recited Jesus' family history (note Mark spells out "son of Mary" instead of "son of Joseph"), and said, "just" a carpenter as proof that he was just one of them, and his teaching a sign of over-reaching and perhaps even arrogance. No one of such common origin could possibly teach with authority.

So, in the face of this kind of rejection, no wonder Jesus redefined family for his followers (see Mark 3:33, where Jesus asked, Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?). Jesus had been rejected here not only by the high and mighty, but by the humblest of his connections--the very people who should have known him, and loved him best.

MINDSET

Then again, what if we put ourselves in the mindset of the folks in Nazareth? How quickly would we accept our next-door neighbor as a miraculous teacher, let alone the reputed Son of God? Whom do we consider "worthy" of leading or teaching us? How do we even begin to look at another with the eyes of God, to see in the most unexpected of people those whom God has chosen to bless with leadership abilities? Would we have chosen the youngest one, the one out with the flocks (the dirty job), to be anointed as the next leader, as Samuel chose David? Can we really open our hearts and minds to folks we've watched grow up? Or do we barricade ourselves from the fullness of blessings that God can pour out upon us?

THE COMMITTEE IN THE CROWD

Sometimes the rejection by the crowd is not head-on and personal. We have other ways of snuffing-out, stifling, stunting, and stopping those we don't want to see or hear from. When have you heard—or said—this in church or at a committee meeting?

1. We've never done it that way before.
2. We're not ready for that.
3. We are doing all right without trying that.

4. We tried it once before.
5. We don't have money for that.
6. That's not our job.
7. Something like that can't work.

Sometimes, because the word spoken stops us in our shoes, our crowd rejects the leader. The truth and the challenge prick and needle, and we refuse to listen—and to grow. The Late Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador remarked,



"A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?" ~[Click for source](#)

As Barbara Brown Taylor insightfully described the situation: "So call this an 'un-miracle' story, in which Jesus held the match until it burned out in his hand, while his family and friends sat shaking their heads a safe distance away" (*Bread of Angels*, p. 185, Crowley Publishing, 1997). Instead of working great wonders, Jesus had to walk away from his own hometown that day and went on "to go shine his light somewhere else." I notice that the gospel writer makes no mention of Jesus ever returning to this hometown synagogue.

However, undeterred from his God-given mission, Jesus sent out the disciples. He paired them off, giving them authority to deal with evil opposition. Having just experienced rejection himself, Jesus went on to tell the disciples in Mark 6:11...if you are not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don't make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way. So, even as a door of ministry of proclamation closed, Jesus opened a window of opportunity on the road out among the masses of people. Furthermore, Jesus instructed his disciples—the third crowd!—to do the same, which when you think about it is far better than just waiting for people to come.

ROCKING THE BOAT

Jesus knew that those who do not want to hear you will not hear you, even those who once loved you as a neighbor, friend, or family member. It's as though Jesus was preparing the disciples for the coming rejection. If they kept preaching their message of forgiveness, of dependence on God and not Rome or the temple or the puppet kingdom of Herod, pretty soon, all of Israel would be like Nazareth for them all.

A place where they would not be welcomed, a place the crowd would be afraid to have them around, because they were not afraid to rock the boat.

CROWD NUMBER THREE

Friends, how daunting to realize that we are heirs of that little crowd of rebels who were sent out two-by-two, totally dependent on God and the kindness of strangers, to proclaim a word of hope to the hopeless...a word of challenge to those of power and wealth...a word of deliverance to saint and sinner alike, urging folks with the good news, asking persons to repent...change their heart and their ways... to seek the way of God...the way of justice, peace, fairness, obedience to a set of principles that can be summarized as love God, love neighbor, love self.



As I'm thinking about that tale of two crowds, David symbolized the people's hopes and dreams down throughout history, but only until this one who was more David than David, the mature David, the David of God's dream, rested on the throne. David, the prize of Samuel's crowd, rose from obscure shepherd boy to king, and from last born in his family to first in the nation.

However, I have become more impressed with this son of David called Jesus, who though rejected in his hometown of Nazareth put aside his own greatness and pursued a route of downward mobility, emptying himself, taking our form and shape, while becoming obedient to death like some criminal (see [Phil. 2:6-8](#)). Jesus went from the heights to the depths, from glory to degradation. His humiliation was his coronation with a crown of thorns, reputation destroyed, family intimidated, and friends scattered.

But, oh when Jesus rose on Easter morning, God made him King of King, and Lord of Lords! And, he became not only the Good Shepherd, but as hymn writer Henry Williams Baker wisely asserted, "The King of Love, My Shepherd Is!"

We're attempting to follow this crowd. Not alone, but with one another, and with the Spirit of the Christ who sends us out, living and speaking the Good News. Sure, there will be those who won't want to hear what we have to say, who won't accept what we give or offer, who may think us mad, silly or just plain delusional. But like Jesus, we aren't engaged in a popularity contest for ourselves or even for God. Instead, we're in that mission trip crowd of love, grace, and healing.

"We've a Savior to show to the nations. . . so they may come to the truth of God." Let's follow this crowd!

WEEK FOUR SPIRITUAL PYRAMID PRACTICE:

PARTICIPATING IN SMALL GROUPS

Participating in small groups builds our faith, and is another way to learn to pray and to be guided in our understanding and application of the scriptures. There are so many resources to guide small groups. Conversations about the scriptures and reading books about different forms of prayer (and practicing different forms of prayer) are enlivening for personal growth. The added benefit is that growth through Christian conferencing, or fellowship, comes in learning and praying with others. If there's not a group in your church that meets your needs, ask 4-8 others to join you at a time that works for you, meeting wherever and whenever you want. And truly make it a small group that focuses on prayer and Bible study, not church gossip!

And if you have been serving on every committee, taught every class, and have done just about everything in the church to keep it going, then make sure that you are also working on the foundation of your faith—prayer and Bible study—and spiritual growth through a small group. The “pillars of the church” work so hard, but sometimes forget *why* they do all this service. And often their spirits are shriveling because they don't have enough time or energy to really care for their souls. Make sure your spiritual diet is truly balanced! What might you give up in order to rebuild a spiritual foundation in your life?



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When have you been dismissed because you are different than others? How did that affect you?
2. Who is worthy of your following? When have you dismissed someone younger, or less schooled, or less experienced, than you? How does another's different-ness impact your willingness to listen with respect?
3. Jesus' life displayed a reverse trajectory: from glory in heaven, to earth, to death on a cross... How do you react to that idea in your own life? How do you view power?
4. David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. Jesus was 30-some years old when he received the coronation of thorns, was mocked as King of the Jews, was crucified and rose from the dead. He will reign forevermore. As you consider our current political and religious landscape, how does this comparison impact you?

MEDITATION

5-8 Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion. ~Philippians 2:6-8, The Message

SHEER SHEEP

The Icelandic leader sheep is a separate line within the Icelandic breed of sheep. These sheep were leaders in their flocks. The leadership ability runs in bloodlines and is equally in males and females.

Sheep of this strain have the ability, or instinct, to run in front of the flock, when it is driven home from the mountain pastures in autumn, from the sheep sheds to the winter pasture in the morning and back home in the evening, through heavy snowdrifts, over ice covered ground, or across rivers. Sometimes the Leaders would take the whole flock of grazing sheep on winter pasture back to the farm, early in the day, if a blizzard was on its way. ~Susan Schoenian, [Sheep 101](#)



QUOTE

Power comes

Not from taking up arms

But from laying down our lives.

Not from worry and work

But from worship.

Not from seizing

But from service.

Not from grasping

But from giving.

Not from being right

But from being repentant.

Not from my will

But from God's.

Not from self-sufficiency

But from surrender to the Shepherd.

Power comes

From being loved.

~Jane Rubietta, *Resting Place*

ACTION

View each day as a mission trip, you, the "sent-out" one.



HE KNOWS YOUR NAME:
THE JOY OF KNOWING AND BEING KNOWN BY THE SHEPHERD
WEEK FIVE
By Myron McCoy

²² Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one." ~John 10:22-30

Everywhere we turn, our lives appear to be identified by numbers. The United States government knows us by our Social Security number. The State of Illinois recognizes us by our issued driver's license number. The bank knows us by our account number. Even the Conference and general church recognize our churches by assigned numbers. This numbers' business can be so pervasive as to make one wonder if there is any recognition without a number.

Nonetheless, one can find comfort in knowing God knows us intimately regardless, with or without a number. Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me" (John 10:27).



Sheep, contrary to public opinion, are not dumb. Cows are led from behind. Sheep require leading from in front, and develop an exclusive relationship with their shepherd. They will not be led by just anyone. When sheep know the shepherd, that shepherd can walk right through a sleeping flock without creating a disturbance. A stranger can cause chaos.

In fact, sheep know their shepherd's voice so well, they simply won't follow another. Even today, Bedouin shepherds bring their flocks to the same watering hole, much as they would have in Jesus' lifetime, while not worrying about mix-ups. Each shepherd has a distinctive means of calling, signaling individual sheep

to withdraw and follow their shepherd home. Those sheep know to whom they belong, and they follow that one only.

Here in the Gospel of John, detractors and opponents of Jesus attempt to ensnare him. Jesus makes known who he is and in a number of ways demonstrates what he is about. Most recently, he's healed a blind man and gotten flack for the miracle (John 9). A few folks seem to get it, perhaps thinking he's someone they have long awaited. However, many others see him as suspect at the least or at worst some sham blasphemer, and they have stones at the ready to prove it (John 10:31).

Why are some able to believe and some are not?

Rather than get tangled in that question, note that Jesus doesn't get into a great deal of speculation on the difficulties of belief, or the causes of skepticism. Jesus simply states, My sheep know who I am and believe. If they don't, they're not my sheep because they don't know who I am and believe.



Is this not the difficult part? Believing?

Perhaps you are the one without hesitation and certainty who can say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord..."

Maybe you have never been vexed by the slightest of reservation of belief about God and Jesus. You are to be commended, as that is truly remarkable! Belief can come relatively easily for some. Still, we are mindful of the many who heard firsthand his words and were onlookers to his great works, and how many did not believe.

Jesus said to his critics, You do not believe simply because you are not my sheep. My sheep know me, know my voice, and believe. You're not in my sheepfold, so of course, you don't believe.

Nevertheless, Jesus doesn't say one is admitted into the flock if they believe or that one is kicked out of the flock if they don't believe. Rather Jesus says that, if you're in the flock, you're one of his. You hear his voice and know him, and he knows you and won't let you go.

Are you in the flock? Note the question isn't even framed around a particular church. If we are in the flock, we hear Jesus' voice and he knows us and that's all it takes.

In my younger years, I use to think there was a fixed absoluteness to the faith, much like taking a written exam for a driver's license or a test for promotion of some kind. In cases such as these, going beyond a certain amount of wrong answers brings failure.

Yet, Jesus doesn't say anything like that here. Jesus simply says his sheep hear his voice and he knows them and they know him. We are in the fold just on the basis of hearing his voice. This is comforting, since in our growing-in-grace journey we may find ourselves with doubts, questions, or even reservations along the way.

The point is somehow and somewhere we have heard something that sounded in some way like the voice of God inviting us to come and be part of his gathered flock. And, this is enough for Jesus to keep us for good.

I find comfort in Jesus saying, nothing can snatch my sheep from my hand (John 10:28). Believe that, even if you can't believe anything else. Our relationship with the Shepherd is based upon who the Shepherd is rather than who we are, or any other number beyond this: We are numbered among his sheep.

WEEK FIVE SPIRITUAL PYRAMID:

RETREAT

Take a spiritual retreat. Once a year or so, a time away to focus on our spiritual life and growth can cap our health plan! It can be on our own, hiking the mountains or with a hundred others, praying, studying and serving together. Just don't let the annual retreat take the place of all the foundational spiritual growth and health that is essential on our pathway of discipleship! Let it be a time to rebuild your foundation of faith.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When have you felt like a number? How do you respond/react to that sensation?
2. Other voices have no power over sheep except to incite terror and scattering. What voices in your life have more power than Jesus' voice?
3. How do you recognize the Shepherd's voice?

4. What doubts and reservations do you have about being “in the flock”? How much do you believe Jesus’ words, “Nothing can snatch you from my hand”?
5. When have you been on a retreat? Why? Why not? What will stop you from getting away for a day (or more) of soul care?

MEDITATION

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” ~John 10:27

SHEER SHEEP

Sheep in sync: a 25-second video of sheep responding to their language.



[Watch here](#)

QUOTE

*A personal retreat allows us room to be honest with God about how imperfect we are, how disillusioned we are about our life and our inability to live holy and wholly this side of heaven.... A personal retreat is simply a concentrated and consecrated time with God. It is that resting place where we remove ourselves from the demands of our life and allow God to speak in an unhurried setting. Retreat centers scattered around North America work perfectly for the personal retreat, but a state park, a friend’s empty home or some other setting works well, as long as solitude is possible and distractions minimal. Retreats aren’t about running away from the world. They prepare us to love and serve those around us. ~Jane Rubietta, *Resting Place: A Personal Guide to Spiritual Retreat**

ACTION

Arrange a personal retreat for yourself. It is not a place to check off a list of to-dos, but rather, a place to listen deeply: to your own soul, to God, to your life, to your calling. Set a date and place, and get it on your calendar.



MARCHING OFF THE MAP

WEEK SIX

By Myron McCoy

The Lord is my shepherd;

I shall not want.

² He makes me to lie down in [b]green pastures;

He leads me beside the [c]still waters.

³ He restores my soul;

He leads me in the paths of righteousness

For His name's sake.

⁴ Yea, 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.

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

You anoint my head with oil;

My cup runs over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

All the days of my life;

And I will dwell in the house of the Lord

Forever. ~Psalm 23, NKJV

In an earlier time in human history, when much of the world was yet unexplored, unknown, and largely unmapped, maps portrayed those unknown regions with dragons, monsters, and large fish. The not-so-subtle inference of such maps was that these were frightening and fearsome places. Though some of the maps asserted the possibility of also finding fortunes, those symbols sent an ominous message: Stay where you are. Do not go there! Don't go any further; dangers and dreads dwell there.

Folklore claims that the commander of a battalion of Roman soldiers was so engaged in battle that he positioned his troops into an area illustrated by mapmakers with monsters and dragons. The commander, not knowing whether to advance on ahead into the unknown or to turn back into the known devastation, sent a courier to Rome with this urgent request: "Please send new orders. We have marched off the map."

UNCHARTED TERRITORY

As I contemplate the future and think about our churches in the Northern Illinois Conference, and for that matter much of our Christian movement, we find ourselves in such a strange place: unexplored, unknown, uncharted.

In fact, my Sisters and Brothers, I want to suggest today that we have marched off the map.

- We have lost sight of our connectionalism and being part of movement larger than ourselves.
- We have lost sight of, support for, and trust in our institutions.
- We have lost sight of what is in the best interest of United Methodist movement in the world and in our designated geographical boundary of the Northern Illinois Conference. Instead, we have been making important decisions based on economic and political considerations for the few versus the many.
- We have lost sight of the essential question, what will help to insure a stronger future for those who will come after us?
- We have lost sight of our unity, and like many of our fellow U.S citizens have been stoking the flames of anti-Semitism, racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. We stand much closer to chaos than to community.

God help us! God help us! God help us! We're in uncharted territory, and we find ourselves situated with the dragons, the monsters, and the large fish. We're off the map, but we can't stay there, and we can't go backwards.

Beating a hasty retreat and returning to the good old days is not an option. We cannot go back to the ways of yesterday; they are just that, yesterday. The good old days were probably not as good as have been romanticized. Many of the ways of yesterday are irrelevant in today's culture, both within and outside the church walls. However, we cannot remain in our present condition.

NAVIGATING HOPE

So we ask ourselves, and our church: How do we navigate hope, find direction and move through the yet uncharted realm beyond what we see and experience? Who and what can we lean on when we have marched off our maps? I am convinced that as we reconnect, we regain sight and vision, and see again the big picture: our impact as UMs on the world. We are better and stronger together.

Our Wesleyan faith tradition and our sacred biblical and Christian writings serve to guide our steps along the path. The familiar words of Psalm 23 are a great reservoir of certainty, confidence, and conviction for us at all times, and particularly in those times when we have marched off our maps.

TWO KEY WORDS

David inserted two key words, “though” and “through.” “Even *though* I walk *through* the darkest valley, I will fear no evil” ~(Ps. 23:4, NIV). In fact, they are the same word with the exception of the additional letter “r.” This one little letter “r” makes all the difference in the world. This one letter can turn your “though” into a “through.” This is the letter that can map the future path and provide direction when we have marched off our maps.



David, the innocent shepherd boy, knew the truth behind the first word “though”—for dangers lurked around every bend. There was no “if” about growing obstacles and problems. In Psalm 23, David candidly faced the inevitable. The psalmist proclaimed no “if,” but “though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (though I march off the map).

We really don’t have to live very long to discover that life is not always a banquet, or overflowing cups. Sometimes our hair is not anointed with oil, but grimed with grease. Sometimes we’re not lying in green pastures, but we’re spinning in our blue Mondays. Sometimes we’re not resting by the shore of still waters, but struggling in the valley of the shadows of death. Yet as we “walk,” beyond life’s changing scenes and challenges, Psalm 23 reminds us, “Thou art with us.” God is with us.

UPS, DOWNS, AND GET-AROUNDS: ALL THE WAY HOME

Life and church life certainly have their ups. Yet, none on the journey avoid the downs—the valleys. The psalmist, however, makes it plain that God does not intend for us to stay in our valleys. They are only something we go “through.” Valleys are not resting places, but passage ways. Valleys are not destinations, but detours, obstacles, forks-in-the-road, trenches, and adaptive stepping stones on the journey. We can walk through life’s separations and sorrows. In all our journeying, even when we have marched off our maps!

In American Sign Language that one little letter “r” is made by crossing the middle finger over the index finger. But the crossing of fingers has an older history that predates American Sign Language for those who identify as Christian. In the first centuries when Christianity was wholly illegal, believers were vigorously, and often fatally, persecuted. They found subtle ways to communicate their faith. Accompanying a greeting or a farewell, crossed fingers were a code sign, identifying Christians to one another as “people of the cross.” The crossed fingers were a mute symbol for the cross of Christ and the redemption it bought for persons, nothing to do with luck and everything to do with a trust in God.

David said he had no fear in adversity because of the comfort of God's power: “I fear no evil...your rod and your staff comfort me.” Perhaps David was referring to a shepherd's crook, with its hook on one end. A good shepherd would use it to guide the sheep, lest they stray away. A gentle tap of the staff on a lamb's side would move the animal back into the fold. And the crook could gather up a sheep from a place where it might have fallen. David felt comforted that the Shepherd was guarding his steps, not only in his present circumstances, but also in the future. That grace would see him all the way home.

As John Newton penned,

Through many dangers, toils and snares

We have already come.

T'was grace that brought us safe thus far

And grace will lead us home.

Even *though* the maps of life don't seem to have a way forward, that grace will sustain us and lead us *through*. All the way home.

WEEK SIX SPIRITUAL PYRAMID:

WORSHIP

Meaningful *worship* is built upon the foundation of our personal prayer and Bible study. It's made more meaningful when we are engaged in small groups to grow in our discipleship and to work with each other in strengthening our church. “Helicoptering” into worship each week without any of its foundational practices makes it difficult for us to connect with God, each other, and even ourselves! Or another way of putting it, if we put all our spiritual freight on one hour a week, our spirits will be gasping for spiritual sustenance. It's like eating once a week, relying on an hour to “feed us” rather than “small meals” throughout the week. As we worship God throughout our days, we better prepare ourselves for corporate

worship. In what ways do you worship during the week? And how does that impact your experience of worship (and offering of worship) at church?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where and when have you personally marched off the map? How can that experience help you in this season as a church, on uncharted territory?
2. How might *though* become *through* in your life? Where have you experienced this with God? With others?
3. As a group or individually, make a list of the “off the map” places. How have you allowed them to divide you from others? From God? Commit each of those places to God, and make a commitment to one another to not allow them to become “though” places, but rather “through” places.
4. In what ways do you see the identifying “r”, the crossed finger as an indication of the cross of Christ and your identity as a Christ-follower, impacting your way forward? In the current “marching off the map” condition of our culture and our church, what impact will this have for you? How?

MEDITATION

7-8 Jesus called the Twelve to him, and sent them out in pairs. He gave them authority and power to deal with the evil opposition. He sent them off with these instructions:

8-9 “Don’t think you need a lot of extra equipment for this. You are the equipment. No special appeals for funds. Keep it simple.

10 “And no luxury inns. Get a modest place and be content there until you leave.

11 “If you’re not welcomed, not listened to, quietly withdraw. Don’t make a scene. Shrug your shoulders and be on your way.”

12-13 Then they were on the road. They preached with joyful urgency that life can be radically different; right and left they sent the demons packing; they brought wellness to the sick, anointing their bodies, healing their spirits. ~Mark 6:7-13, The Message

SHEER SHEEP

According to researchers in Australia, sheep can learn and remember. Researchers have developed a complex maze test to measure intelligence and learning in sheep, similar to those used for rats and mice. Using the maze, researchers have concluded that sheep have excellent spatial memory and are able to learn and improve their performance. And they can retain this information for a six-week period. ~Susan Schoenian, [Sheep 101](#)

QUOTE


Dear One
The Great Good Shepherd
Rose from the dead
And now fully equips you
To live this life
With peace
In the midst of death
With everything you need.
My heart is pleased with you
And will work what is pleasing
In you
And through you in this world.
Peace to you. And purpose too.
~Jane Rubietta, *Finding Your Way*

ACTION

When you are in a difficult situation, whether with another person or group, or by yourself, try using the crossed fingers to remind yourself of Christ's work for you, and for others.

A CLOSING WORD

In The United Methodist Church, we say that we want **vital** congregations. A vital congregation isn't about size but spiritual vitality and strength. As a district superintendent in Ohio, I had a church of seven people and I classified it as a vital congregation because of the way in which they were church together in their community. Big or small, urban or suburban or rural, traditional or progressive or middle of the road; none of these are determinants for vitality.

Vitality comes when people are growing in their faith, serving each other and the community and world around them, sharing their faith in their daily lives, and experiencing the joy of being a follower of Jesus. In fact, when I go to a church, I register how much joy there seems to be—how much laughter (especially in worship!), how many smiles, how people seem to deal with differences. Joy is the greatest marker of vitality. How joyful is your church? Watch  [Joyful sheep: O, to bounce and bound with such freedom.](#)

The Northern Illinois Annual Conference's vision is "making and supporting vital Christians in vital congregations that engage their communities and the world for peace, justice and mercy." How do we make vital congregations? By becoming vital Christians ourselves.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

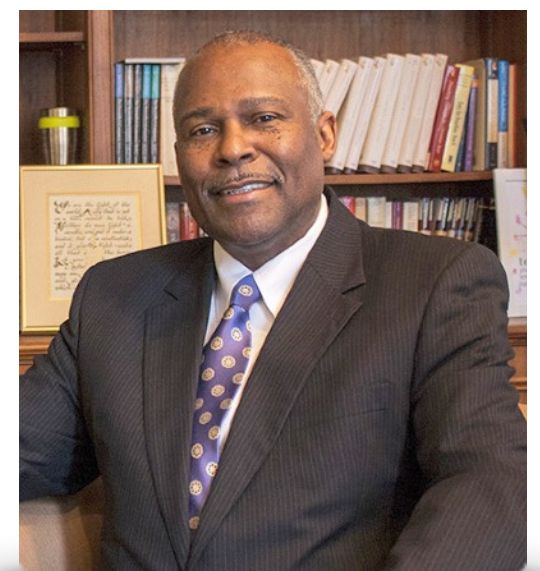
Bishop Sally Dyck

Bishop Sally Dyck grew up in rural Washington State. Her home church is on the corner of a wheat field about 20 miles from any town. She grew up on a farm nearby. Since her appointment to the Northern Illinois Conference, Bishop Sally has worked to help the Northern Illinois Conference strengthen its capacity to fulfill its purpose (given in the *Book of Discipline*): “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world by equipping its local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry beyond the local church; all to the glory of God.” The purpose of the annual conference is to equip and serve the local church so when the purpose is fulfilled, it accomplishes its vision: “making and supporting vital Christians in vital congregations that engage with their communities and the world for peace, justice and mercy.” Believing that an inward focus is the greatest threat to a local church, Bishop Sally works to help churches grow in their engagement with their communities, bringing joy to their cities and towns (Acts 8:8). In rural, suburban and urban areas, all churches have a mission field to which they are called. Bishop Dyck is married to Rev. Dr. Kenneth P. Ehrman since 1976. He is the Director of Field Education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. They have traveled the world together over the years and presently enjoy living in the west loop of Chicago. Bishop Dyck is the author of *A Faithful Heart—Daily Guide for Joyful Living* and co-author with Sarah Ehrman of *A Hopeful Earth—Faith, Science, and the Message of Jesus*.



Rev. Myron McCoy

Rev. Dr. Myron F. McCoy became the Senior Pastor at the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple on July 1, 2014 following eleven years as president of the Saint Paul Theological Seminary headquartered in Overland Park, Kansas with campuses in Leawood, Kansas and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Prior to Dr. McCoy's position at the seminary he actively served through the Northern Illinois Conference in Chicago as a District Superintendent, and as a pastor of Saint Mark UMC (Senior, Associate, and Assistant) and the South Shore UMC. Myron is presently engaged as a Trustee of Ohio Wesleyan University (Chair, Faculty-Trustee Liaison); Board of Directors Greater Chicago Broadcast Ministries (Chair); Downtown-Near North Clergy (Co-Convener); G-ETS Board of Visitors; Northern Illinois Conference UMC Shepherding Team (Co-Chair); Board of Directors of Illinois Churches in Action; and the Board of Trustees of ChildServ. Dr. McCoy received his Bachelor's degree at Ohio Wesleyan University, Master of Divinity degree at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and Doctor of Ministry degree at United Theological Seminary. He was also awarded an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Baker University. McCoy is married to Karen (nee Fulgham). They are the parents of three adult sons, and they have a grandson.



ABOUT THE EDITOR:

Jane Rubietta is a Writing and Speaking Coach, co-founder of Life Launch Me, and the author of 20 books (three on the United Methodist Women's International Reading List). Her latest book is her debut novel, *The Forgotten Life of Evelyn Lewis*. She speaks globally and is the assistant director of WritetoPublish.com. Jane is married to her best friend, an award-winning composer and UM clergy, Rev. Rich Rubietta. They co-lead Abounding Ministries, a 501(c)3 and love to bring hope, laughter, and joy to worship services, conventions, schools, and retreats. Rich is the NIC's resident Circuit Rider, leading and mentoring leaders in the local church each weekend. (See JaneRubietta.com, LifeLaunchMe.com, and UMCAlive.com for more information.)



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

Project Coordinator - Rev. Arlene Christopherson, Ass't to the Bishop and Dir. of Connectional Ministries

Layout Design - Anne Marie Gerhardt, Dir. of Communications

**Northern Illinois United Methodist churches have permission to download and reprint this devotional and share for church and individual study purposes. Enjoy!*

