

They smell like sheep.

Over the years that I have spent around horses and cattle, one thing was certain. At the end of the day, my clothes would carry the odor of the day's work out among the animals. Now, to a farmer, this odor may mean a good day's work. And to the city, it signals the need to move upwind. As the title of my message suggests, we are going to be looking at the role of a shepherd as he or she leads the flock of sheep.

Now being a shepherd is not as easy as it may seem for there are many intricacies that define the role of the shepherd. He or she must be a leader. He or she must have a relationship with the sheep and they must know their individual sheep. A shepherd is a protector and a leader and must be vigilant at all times of predators that try to lead the sheep astray. A shepherd must search and seek out the lost sheep and bring them back to the fold.

As professing Christians dedicated to the will of Christ, we become the shepherds that Jesus counts on to protect and lead his flock.

Jesus asked the disciple Peter three times, "Do you love me?" And three times after Peter's yes, Jesus instructs him, "Feed my sheep."

Jesus is asking each of us this morning, "Do you love me?" If your answer is yes, then it is your responsibility to "feed my sheep" as instructed by Jesus. And here is a bit of a news flash. If you answer yes to that last question, you have just become a shepherd.

As a shepherd, you will be recognized by your smell or in other words, you will be known to your flock by your actions. There are no easy ways to be a shepherd in today's world. A shepherd must form a relationship to those they are chosen to lead. And it is imperative that the shepherd has a relationship to him that they work for, namely our Lord Jesus Christ.

As shepherds, we are accountable to our master, for the sheep belong to him. A shepherd's pasture is vast, and it is not limited to any one small area or walls made of stone. A shepherd's pasture might be fraught with enemies and those who will try to steal the sheep away. A shepherd must be a leader to his flock at all times, guiding them on the rocky paths and lead them away from the thorny bushes along life's highway.

Now you may ask, whom do my flock consist of? Well, in John 10:14 to 16, we read these words, as spoken by Jesus. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father, I lay down my life for the sheep, but I have other sheep that are not from this sheep pen. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. Then there will be one flock, one shepherd."

It is clear that our purpose as a shepherd is not only to gather and to lead those who already belong to the flock, but it is also to gather those who have not yet become part

of the flock. I believe that what Jesus is saying here is that we must not be content to shepherd only those who we feel are like-minded with us, but we must venture out into the world and seek the lost.

In 1865, William Booth, an English Methodist preacher, and his wife Catherine scoured the poor areas of London seeking lost souls, people who did not attend a church of any kind. They provided care and food and fed the souls of the people with the word of God. William and Catherine would go on to be the founders of the Salvation Army that still today is considered as one of the most charitable institutions in the world.

William and Catherine walked along among the poor, the downtrodden, and they smelled like sheep. We may not find an institution, but we can certainly feed the souls of mankind with the unchanging word of God.

When we allow the great shepherd Jesus to lead us, we will often do things that we do not realize make big differences in the lives of people.

In 1855, Joseph M. Scriven wrote a poem to comfort his mother who was living in Ireland, a poem that would comfort countless others in years to come. From after her death the poem was found and it was put to music. It is inestimable as to the impact of that first line, *What a friend we have in Jesus*, would have over a hundred years later. As it is sung in churches and recorded by gospel artists, it is second only to *Amazing Grace*.

Where God leads, the shepherd follows. We, as you listening here or reading this message online, you are saying to yourself, but I am too old. Well I ask you then to remember Moses and how God's leading led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt to the promised land. True Christian shepherds are led and inspired by God to carry on the work of his Son Jesus Christ here on earth and bring their sheep to the promised land. If on the other hand you feel you are too young, remember a young boy named David, who by the strength of God's leading and became a giant killer.

God does not expect us to work under our own power to slay the giant Satan. He will provide all the power and wisdom that is needed to the willing shepherd.

In verse 11 of our scripture Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." To be a shepherd is to be a leader and to be a leader to those whom you lead must come first.

In today's world, it seems that leadership has become distorted by selfish greed and the motto *save yourself*. Jesus tells us that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In other words the shepherd or the leader is willing to put the sheep or those that are being led above self.

The distorted leader is not hard to recognize. He is the leader that when things go wrong he resorts to playing the blame game, finding someone to blame for his inadequacies. He hides behind organizational rules and regulations. We find these distorted leaders in politics, in business and even in the church.

Jesus calls this kind of leader a hireling. The hireling is not a shepherd, for when trouble comes, he leaves the sheep and he runs away allowing the sheep to be scattered and to be led away. The sad truth is that many sheep that once were part of the fold have been scattered and have been run off by negligent leaders or those who took on the responsibility to be shepherds.

In verse 7, we read the words of Jesus when he says, “Truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.”

Now in ancient days, the shepherd would often have a fenced area with one gate that the sheep would enter so that they would be safe for the night. Jesus makes it clear that by using the example of a gate that we are only safe if we enter into leadership through Him. It is only when we put our trust in Jesus that we and the flock will be safe and find rest.

One of the greatest tools we have to open the gate is prayer. Prayer warriors pray and continuously care for the sheep and like Job in the Old Testament pray that God would expand their territory. When we pray that prayer our God will open up opportunities beyond our imaginations.

If we are to be good shepherds, we must overcome the fear of being in the middle of the sheep no matter where we find them. We must not let prejudice, environment or fatigue stop us from the role of shepherding. When we find ourselves in the middle of God's flock we stand in the middle of God's granted new territory.

A number of years ago, while working with the homeless in Seattle, Washington, I walked the filthy streets of despair and hopelessness among the homeless and the sick of spirit and mind with another pastor, Craig Rennebo, author of a book titled *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*. I would like to read you a short excerpt from this book that makes clear the role of a shepherd. I have changed it a bit to fit into this message but the message remains the same.

At ten o'clock in the morning, a man entered the Cathedral of St. James and found his way into the sacristy. He dressed himself in the robes of a priest. From there he strode into the great worship space and up three steps to the altar in the center of the sanctuary. There he stood as if celebrating the Mass, bathed in light from the clear glass dome above.

A handful of people sat in the nave meditating or knelt inside the chapel praying.

The assistant to the preacher and the safekeeper of the cathedral quietly approached the man at the altar and he said “What are you doing?”

The man replied, “I am the Pope. Where else would I celebrate the Mass in Seattle but in the cathedral?”

Well the assistant politely asked the man to come away from the altar and return the vestments to the sacristy.

“You're welcome to pray or meditate, if you wish, and of course to attend service the assistant said. “The next will be at noon.”

“You don't think I'm the Pope?”

“No,” said the assistant.

The man returned the vestments and took his leave.

Later that day, another staff member found the man sleeping in the guest room of the rectory and again asked him what he was doing.

“I am the Pope,” the man said. “Where else would I rest but in the rectory of the cathedral?”

The staff member said, “You don't look like the pope, my friend.”

The man said, “You don't think I am the pope?”

The staff member replied the pope is in Rome. He promised someone would come and talk with him.

This is when the call came to Craig. When Craig arrived the stranger looked him over with exasperation. “These people don't think I am the Pope.”

Craig could see the man was alone in his illness and estranged from others so he chose his words very carefully. He said, “I am a Protestant chaplain and not an expert on the papacy. He continued on saying, “How about this? You are a human being I am a human being can we start there.”

The man said, Okay.”

As shepherds are leaders, we find commonality with those that we shepherd. As a shepherd he leads and he works in a state of humility and faith and thereby earns the trust of those he leads. He becomes the gentle hands of God caring for the souls He has entrusted into our care. As shepherds we must be careful not to betray that trust that our God has placed in us to be servants in his great kingdom on earth. A shepherd must not dismiss those whom they think are not worthy of God's grace. I believe that God places these people in our lives as an opportunity to be true shepherds.

For most of my life I have been a contractor, building wonderful buildings that would house families, but I believe the greatest thing that God has allowed me to build is a trust and faith in Jesus Christ and the sheep that he has entrusted to my care.

And today you, too, can build trust and faith in those who so desperately need to hear that God's word is unchanging in a changing world. Give God the chance to expand your territory today and become the shepherd you were intended to be.

Amen.