

*I wish to speak to you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

The image of Christ as the Shepherd and His people as His sheep is a beautiful and ancient image. This metaphor is immediately recognizable to most people regardless of age, religious background, or nationality. When I had the privilege of teaching John's parable of the Good Shepherd in a Godly Play Sunday school class, I was amazed at how quickly the young students figured out that Jesus was the shepherd without being told that explicitly. They were able to intuit that someone who watches over sheep and takes care of them like sheep is God. They knew instinctively that God watches over people in the same way a shepherd watches sheep. It was powerful for me to watch their realization of Christ as the Good Shepherd unfold, but for some reason the sheep metaphor just doesn't work for me.

I don't know if any of you have ever felt this way, but for some reason I just don't feel like a sheep. Maybe this is because sheep get a bad reputation for being dumb and smelly. I actually did a little research on sheep online and their reputation is unfair because they are actually intelligent animals. I think the real reason I don't like seeing myself as a sheep because they are herd animals, and they move in packs. If you see yourself as independent, or a leader, or someone who likes to be creative different or innovative, then it might be hard to see yourself as a sheep. I have hunch that this is something that might apply to some St. Georgians as well.

Fortuitously as I was preparing for this sermon, we talked about an essay in one of my classes by Evelyn Underhill in which she describes the sheep dog trials

she observed in England. In particular she describes the relationship between the sheepdog and its shepherd. She wrote, "The best dog that I saw never barked once, and **he spent an astonishing amount of his time sitting perfectly still, looking at the shepherd. The communion of spirit between them was perfect.** They worked as a unit. Neither of them seemed anxious or in a hurry. Neither was committed to a rigid plan; they were always content to wait. That dog was the docile and faithful agent of another mind. He used his whole intelligence and initiative, but always in obedience to his master's directive will." This essay is a game changer for me - I want to be a sheepdog and not a sheep! I want to be so focused on what God wants me to do that I can't do anything else. This feels like a liberating concept! The communion of wills between the shepherd and the sheepdog she describes is so powerful. You can see the sheepdog staring at its shepherd and the shepherd staring back. They are able to communicate like this, and have become one mind.

The strong connection between the sheep and the sheepdog has another important affect. The dog's attitude is shaped by the fact that he is doing the shepherd's will. Observing the sheepdog trials, Underhill wrote: "The little mountain sheep he had to deal with were amazingly tiresome, as expert in doubling and twisting and going the wrong way as any naughty little boy. The dog went steadily on with it; his tail never ceased to wag. What did that mean? It meant that **his relation to the shepherd was the center of his life**; and because of that, he enjoyed doing his job with the sheep, he did not bother about the trouble, nor get discouraged with the apparent results. The dog had transcended mere dogginess. His actions were dictated by something right beyond himself. He was the agent of

the shepherd, working for a scheme which was not his own and the whole of which he could not grasp, and it was just that which was the source of the delightedness, the eagerness and also the discipline with which he worked. But he would not have kept that peculiar and intimate relation **unless he had sat down and looked at the shepherd a good deal.**"

I am astonished that the sheepdog does not get weary with his onerous task of herding the sheep. The dog is so fulfilled by doing his shepherd's will that he does not get dragged down by the drudgery of his tasks. And isn't that an amazing thought! As she says, the sheepdog transcends its dogginess by following the will of the shepherd. For me this means that if you are doing God's will then you won't feel that your work is annoying or a burden. We can transcend our own humanity by following the will of our shepherd, Christ.

But how do we achieve this kind of union with our shepherd, Christ? Underhill makes it pretty clear that the sheepdog stays connected to the shepherd by staying still and staring at the shepherd. The sheepdog gives the shepherd HIS undivided attention and this is where his focus comes from. What does staying still and looking at the shepherd mean for us? Obviously since we aren't actually sheepdogs and there may not be something physical for us to stare at, we may need to do some interpretation here. I think Underhill's metaphor points to prayer as our path to understanding God's will. In order to get in touch with our inner sheepdogs, we have to spend time in prayer thinking about the will of our shepherd.

And I know for some, the idea of sitting still and staring is a daunting one, so don't let that limit your idea of prayer. Prayer can take many forms. You can pray

while running or walking, if the idea of sitting still makes you nervous. Or you can doodle images while you pray if that helps you focus. Some people find it is helpful just to have a special prayer spot in your house or apartment.

Underhill leaves us with a final image in her essay of the sheepdog curled up in his shepherd's lap after a long day's work together. This for me is the image I want to pray around. I want to be the sheepdog curled up in its shepherd's lap. And maybe this image will appeal to you too. Hopefully we can all find a way to pray ourselves into our shepherd's lap. *Amen.*