

May the Wisdom of the Word and the hunger of our hearts meet,  
leading us ever more deeply into your heart, O God. Amen.

I love bumper stickers.

I am not a fan of bumper sticker theology.

I once honked at a car that had the bumper sticker “Honk if you love Jesus!” and was given a one finger salute in response.

Here is a sampling of others I have seen recently:

- “God loves you—some restrictions apply.”
- Don’t give up—look up! (Don’t try that while driving, by the way.)
- I pray—deal with it! (Wow. Lots of mixed messages there.)
- And one I thought was particularly self-centered: “Get your way: pray.”

A couple of weeks ago I received a promo letter for a new book coming out. Its title: *Not a fan*.

The promotional tract said:

***Fan: an enthusiastic admirer.***

*In the Gospels, Jesus never seemed too interested in fans.*

***I am not a fan. I am a follower.***

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Not a fan: a follower. It would make a good bumper sticker.

But it's also an interesting theological position.

Today we have read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." We also read in John that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We are getting a lot of sheep and shepherd imagery today. To the farming/herding society of Jesus day, the image would have been a rich one.

What does a sheep need? The first answer to that question is: protection. Predators will always try to get to the sheep. They never go in the door, because it is guarded by the shepherd. Predators are sneaky. They sneak over the fence, they quietly go around the perimeter. And the sheep: they don't always help the situation, either. You would think that they would bleat if there was a danger, but I have heard that if two sheep are grazing together and a wolf comes up beside them and kills one of them, the other sheep will continue grazing, lean over and say "Pretty good grazing 'round here."

So: sheep need protection from predators, and they sometimes need protection from themselves.

Sheep are creatures of habit: They will graze the same hills until they become devoid of vegetation. They will not recognize this fact and

move to greener pastures. Unless the shepherd leads them, they will die of starvation.

While serving a parish in Wyoming, I had a sheep herder/shepherd in my congregation. He taught me a lot about sheep.

Sheep do not have good hygiene: They will pollute their own ground until it is run over with disease and parasite. Their fleece can grow very long and become weighed down with mud, manure, burrs and debris. If a sheep falls and rolls onto its back, (especially with a full coat) it can't right itself unless a shepherd comes and puts it back on its feet. If the shepherd doesn't do that, it will die.

So: protection is the first task of the shepherd because sheep by nature are followers.

I heard a story about a young woman who wanted to go to college, but she was worried when she read the question on the application blank that asked, "Are you a leader?" Since the girl was honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst. To her surprise, she received this letter from the college: "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower".

We live in a society that expects everyone to be a leader. The church is not immune from this, either. We talk about raising up leaders in our congregations. We never talk about raising up followers. Leadership is more to be prized than serving. No one wants to be a follower. No one wants to be a sheep.

But don't we all sometimes want protection?

Don't we all—at some time or another in our lives—graze in the same places until they are devoid of nourishment—but sometimes feel we can't move on? Wouldn't we sometimes rather cling to what we know nourished us in the past, rather than realize that that patch of ground is now a barren desert? We need a shepherd to move us to a green patch where we can get the nourishment our souls crave.

And sometimes don't we let past hurts and barbs and patterns weigh us down, until we find ourselves flat on our backs and stuck—and we need the Good Shepherd to pick us up, shear us, and put us on our feet again.

The Good Shepherd does all this.

So whose voice will we follow? Do we follow the voice of society, the voice of marketing, the voice of bumper stickers, the voice of pundits- left and right, the voice of the world- which urges us to judge others, the voice telling us to eat in pastures that no longer support us, *and* urges us to always lead?

Or do we become caring committed followers and listen for the master's voice?

I guess the question really is: are we fans of Jesus, or are we followers of the Good Shepherd? Whose voice is calling you?

Amen.