

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Year B

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May 3, 2015

Text: John 10:11-18/Psalm 23

Title: “A Place to Call Home: A Place at the Table”

I can't remember being around sheep much. Maybe just a brief exposure at a children's zoo or a petting zoo as a kid. The farmers I knew growing up never raised sheep. Just chickens and cows and pigeons and cash crops in the field. So I don't know a lot about sheep or shepherding for that matter. At least not when it comes to first-hand experience. And I'm guessing most of you don't either.

We really are disconnected from what it means to be a shepherd, and yet some of our most beloved images of God and Jesus have to do with shepherding. Why would God choose to use an image like this when so many in the world have little idea of what it's actually like to be a shepherd?

James Rebanks is a real, live shepherd in England who is Oxford educated. He worked for UNESCO, an organization established after WWII, that seeks to work for peace, but he could not live a life that didn't include farming the land from which his father and his grandfather before him eeked out a living. So he went back to the land. He loves the life, has written a book about shepherding and has 60,000 followers on Twitter using the handle @herdyshepherd1. People are interested in his life as one who cares for the sheep. We have a video clip to share with you but before we see it there are two words he uses that are important to know about.

Heft: to become accustomed and attached to an area of upland pasture—mountainous region of northwest England.

Hefted: describing livestock that has become thus attached.

Take a look.

A shepherd like Rebanks is deeply rooted in the land as are his sheep. A reporter wrote an article about him and spent time with him on the farm. One of the Ewe's was having trouble. She was pregnant with twins who died in-utero and Rebanks had to remove the babies by pulling them out.

“We don't lose many, but there are odd ones you do lose and you're

guttled. It's more than a commercial thing. It might seem strange to a non-farmer, but even if we only bred animals for meat – and we don't [most of their money is made from selling breeding stock], but even if we did – you still think it's your duty to look after them as well as you possibly can until the day they go. I get occasional people on Twitter saying, 'Why would you care? You're going to kill them anyway.' As if your whole point of existing was to kill a thing. But we see it the other way round: our whole point is to keep it alive."

**“Our whole point is to keep it alive.”**

Maybe that's one of the reasons scripture describes God as “my shepherd” and Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Because the whole point of taking care of the sheep is to keep them alive as they are led beside still waters, as they are made to lie down in green pastures where there is rest and nourishment, where they are led on right paths—not the wrong ones. And even when there are dark valleys through which the sheep must travel, knowing the shepherd is there with a protective walking stick to handle any threats of thieves or predators provides a sense of assurance that it will be okay. The shepherd has their backs.

But the shepherd has other flocks, too, according to John's Gospel. And it may be the other flocks for whom the table is prepared in their presence. The table is open to enemies, too. Some scholars think this table preparation in the presence of enemies refers to the radical hospitality of the ancient near east in which people traveling in the desert were expected to offer food, water and shelter to anyone who had need in the harsh landscape of the desert. That kind of hospitality is proclaimed in Proverbs:

If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;  
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;  
Proverbs 25:21

The table that God, the Good Shepherd, sets is open to everyone. Notice the psalm is about “my enemies” not God's enemies. Although I might prefer to exclude my enemies, God's table is far more inclusive than mine.

Again, Jesus reminds the disciples in the Gospel According to John that “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (John 10:16). As a shepherd, God is always looking to include more sheep in the flock, always setting a table so there is a place for everyone. Maybe God sets this table in the presence of enemies because eating together can bring understanding. Maybe God knows the value of sharing a meal together and the power such fellowship can have in repairing relationships or deepening them. Isn't it around the table that we come to know someone more deeply? It's where we tell stories and hear other's stories. It's how we connect.

In June, we will begin a new worship series called “The Art of Neighboring”. During that series we will be exploring what Jesus' call to love our neighbors might mean in terms of loving those who actually live near us. So you will hear this again during that series but one of

the encouraged methods in the series to get to know people who live near us is to invite them over for dinner. This morning it also seems appropriate to ask you to choose someone or several people whom you may not know well—either in your neighborhood or in the congregation—and invite them to dinner within the next few weeks with no other motive than to embody the inclusiveness of God’s table which is open to all.

Like the psalm writer, we are on the move throughout our lives and find ourselves beside still waters, in green pastures, looking for the right paths, and sometimes find ourselves in dark valleys. When we are able to put ourselves in a place of trust in the One who sets a table where there are places for us and for our enemies alike in the greater grace and mercy of God’s presence, then surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives and we will find ourselves returning to the house of the Lord forever.