

Earth Day - April 26, 2015 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. Nigel Taber Hamilton

Many of you know that Chris and Jerry Lubinsky have, for many years, kept sheep. I can remember being over at their house a couple of years ago and seeing Bear. Now Bear wasn't a bear (of course!), Bear was a Great Pyrenees dog – AKA (in Europe) a Pyrenean Mountain Dog. Bear lived with and among the sheep – you could miss him if he was lying down, because Great Pyrenees' are white, like the sheep. But threaten the sheep and you'd have no problem at all telling the difference! Bear's job was to protect the sheep from predators, to watch over them and ensure their safety. Bear was the good shepherd of his sheep, he was, if you will, a pastor dog.

Not everyone who has sheep has a pastor dog like Bear. Many shepherds use border collies – or, well, regular collies, like Toby. Collies are herding dogs. They're trained to keep the sheep in line, to make them do what the shepherd wants. Border collies are not opposed to nipping at sheep's ankles to get their attention (though I have to say that sounds more like my dachshund, Henry, than it does Toby!). One of my Island Clericus colleagues, Catherine Foote, who's a pastor at University Congregational UCC in the University District, has just such a border collie - unlike Bear the Pastor Dog she uses another descriptor: she calls her border collie a "Prophet Dog!" She gets that from the nipping at the ankles/keeping the sheep in line, reminding them where they should be going and what they should be doing, making sure that they're all moving in the right direction!

I suppose you'll now be imposing that pastor dog/prophet dog on the shepherd of this congregation and wondering which is the better metaphor....but let's not go there today! It's the sheep I want to talk about.

For a long time – and especially among urbanized folk – sheep have been considered to be dumb! Stupid animals who do mindless things, especially when they're scared – like running off a cliff following their leader. I remember that I used a quote from the "Encyclopedia Americana" from its article on sheep in my seminary "Senior Sermon" in 1979 that began something like "despite their general lack of intelligence...."

So who says sheep are dumb?! Or more pointedly, what standard of intelligence are you using to claim that sheep are dumb? There's always a piece missing from any sentence that talks about intelligence in animals – it's a phrase...this phrase: "using human standards."

"Using human standards." I'm on fairly safe ground in saying that human beings are the dominant animal species on this planet. You can see it in the possessive pronoun we apply to that word "planet:" "ours," "our planet." So I suppose it's not really surprising that we impose our own standards of intelligence when we look at other creatures. That's actually the way anthropology and sociology originally developed at the end of the nineteenth century – first from the Frenchman Emile Durkheim, then the so-called "British School" – the theory, if you care, is called "structural functionalism." Simply put, you judged every human culture by comparing it with your own, which, of course, was the epitome of perfection! Thus, every other culture would end up being "primitive" because it wouldn't be like yours.

The problem with that is – as the English found out when their empire fell apart – that when you stop being the dominant culture, you find out to your horror that your own culture is not the epitome of perfection!!

We on the American continent have not learned this painful lesson. We continue to believe that our culture is the epitome of perfection! We are, after all, in sociological terms the “dominant” culture on this planet. But we haven’t learned to recognize and reject the seductive lure of believing that we represent the “epitome of perfection!” Our culture, we still believe is better than every other culture!

Let’s go back to sheep. We continue to believe – out of this dominant human culture model – that, when compared to us, animals fall short in the intelligence department. In 2005 a British newspaper headline stated that according to Cambridge University “Sheep might be dumb ... but they’re not stupid.” <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/mar/06/science.animalwelfare>

It turns out that sheep “possess a sharp sense of individuality and can recognize the faces of at least 10 people and 50 other sheep for at least two years. [In addition] sheep react to facial expressions and, like humans, prefer a smile to a grimace.”

So maybe comparing lay people with sheep is okay?!! Of course, that utterly misses the point! The telling line in that article is this one: “Further studies.... reinforce the notion that sheep are more like us than previously believed.” .....“more like us...” They’re still judging sheep’s intelligence by comparing it to human beings, instead of recognizing that there are many forms of intelligence, and that of sheep is not better or worse than that of human beings, only *different* from ours.

I’m taking the time to talk about this because what it shows is that we have this innate ability to judge other creatures – and perhaps the rest of creation – by comparing them and it with ourselves, making that comparison based on the assumption that we are the epitome of perfection in creation – the kings and queens of creation, if you will. If you believe that, then your approach to creation and the majority of creatures on the planet – creatures that are not human – is going to be exploitive. Creation and all that is in it is simply a cornucopia waiting for humans to come along and avail themselves of its bounty. Creatures have gone extinct because of that attitude.

So I say “A curse on the translators of the NRSV” who used the phrase “dominion over” to translate the relationship of humanity to creation in the first Creation Story in Genesis 1:26. The bible translation called *The Message* captures that description much more accurately: “**God spoke: “Let us make human beings in our image, make them reflecting our nature, so they can be responsible for the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the cattle, and, yes, Earth itself, and every animal that moves on the face of Earth.”**”

“Dominion over” vs. “responsibility for” – power vs. stewardship.

Remember what Jesus said in today’s gospel: “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.....” If you think of Jesus’ use of the sheep/shepherd metaphor as talking

not only about human beings but all of creation, then the “other sheep” are the rest of creation.

We were not put here to exploit creation but to live as a part of it, in integral connection with it. And now, as the planet’s weather changes, as the exploitive “wolves” are at our communal doors, the question for us is this: are we able to see ourselves – all of us – as God’s sheepdogs (either pastor dogs or prophet dogs) taking responsibility for God’s creation? Acting to maintain the integrity of God’s “flock?” Because running away isn’t an option.