

From This Corner
“They Smell Like Sheep”
Larry Baird

“We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.” So says Psalm 100. Initially I grew up thinking that was wonderful. The stained glass behind the altar of my hometown church has the image of Jesus cradling a lamb. Others encircle him in pastoral splendor. It was a beautiful picture and a constant reminder of Jesus’ care for his flock. I sometimes pictured myself as that lamb cradled in Jesus’ arms. I held this serene notion until I actually met some sheep on my grandparent’s farm. Most of the time they were fine as animals go, but I learned they were not always the sharpest barnyard residents. For instance, one day I visited a young sheep tethered on the side lawn. It got so excited that it ran in circles about me until the rope shut off the circulation in my legs. In great pain, I cried out until my mother and grandmother rescued me by struggling to get the lamb to reverse its direction. It was no easy task. As I got more distraught the more panicked the lamb became. I had the welts from this encounter on my legs for a long time. Do I still have some repressed feelings about it? OK, I freely admit I do not count sheep to get to sleep.

This childhood experience has caused me to wonder what exactly Jesus saw when he looked at sheep. On the one hand, they are rather pleasant looking creatures. On the other hand, they scare easily and do many stupid things. Most often, they have a vacant expression on their faces. In fact, I have never seen any sheep facial expression other than vacant or panicked. I have to admit however that for years I have kept my distance.

My own pastoral experience in ecclesiastical pastures leads me to believe that Jesus may have used this imagery with more subtlety in mind than we often acknowledge. Not too long ago I read a book by Dr. Lynn Anderson entitled “They Smell Like Sheep: Spiritual Leadership for the 21st Century”, Howard Publishing, 1997. Although he did not elaborate on the metaphor, I have found the image helpful in relating to church life. The flock in any given location can be a good-looking bunch, but every once in awhile all hell breaks loose and the superintendent gets a call. Isaiah captured the thought when he wrote “we all, like sheep, have gone astray.” Clearly, churches are in need of a shepherd.

So let us take comfort that Jesus was and is the Good Shepherd. Let us also remain ever so humble that we are the sheep of his flock. I personally can think of no better corrective for those of us in the Church who sometimes get to acting like we are in charge to know Jesus thought of us as a flock of sheep.

In the words of hymn writer Dorothy Thrupp: “Savior, like a shepherd lead us, much we need Thy tender care.” “Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus! Thou hast loved us, love us still.”