

The Norm of Sheep Devotion

Summary

When we are devoted to our work, our jobs are central and we end up exhausted. But devotion to Christ's sheep? This focus keeps Jesus at the center and gives us a life worth living.

One summer, a Presbyterian pastor took his family to Scotland. His daughter had two requests for the trip: She wanted to play golf, and she wanted to cuddle sheep.

The pastor had no idea how he was going to fulfill either of these requests. But early in the trip, they arrived on the Isle of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland. This island is where St. Columba founded his monastery in the sixth century and is the point from which he took Christianity to mainland Scotland.

When they reached the lobby of the St. Columba Hotel, the pastor asked the receptionist about golf. The man at the desk said, “We have an 18-hole course on Iona. Balls and clubs are available here in the hotel, free of charge. There are no fees for the golf course, but I have to warn you — the groundskeepers are sheep and cows.”

He wasn't kidding. The course is maintained by farm animals who graze it all day. They also fertilize it! So both of the pastor's problems were solved in an instant. His daughter played a round of golf, and she got a chance to cuddle sheep.

Iona is a lovely, green and windswept island — a place where you can practice what could be called “sheep devotion.” But Iona is definitely the exception, rather than the rule. Most places around the world are defined by “work devotion.”

Work devotion

Take Silicon Valley, for example. This region in California is full of brutally competitive workplaces that demand long hours and nonstop effort. The magazine *Christianity Today* reports that Apple has “a reputation as one of the most intense workplaces in the Valley.” Elon Musk, the founder of Tesla and SpaceX, is said to treat those who work for him “like ammunition” — they are used until “exhausted and discarded.”

Sociologists call this “the norm of work devotion.” This means that we consider work to be the central part of our existence. In *Christianity Today*, Dorcas Teng-Chozun writes that our identity and sense of value become tied to our productivity, and we feel that we must prove ourselves worthy of our job by making it the central focus of our lives.¹

When we live by the norm of work devotion, we become victims of unrealistic deadlines, late-night conference calls, shrinking leisure time and the expectation that we will always be on call. Before long, we find ourselves pushed beyond our limits.

In times of stress, Jesus appears

The first followers of Jesus are feeling exhausted and stressed when they go fishing on the Sea of Tiberias, also known as the Sea of Galilee. Although they had seen Jesus after the resurrection on Easter, they cannot figure out what their next step should be. Not knowing what to do, they go back to their old jobs as fishermen — they are practicing the norm of work devotion.

Seven of them fish all night but catch nothing. Then the risen Jesus appears on the beach, but they do not recognize him. He recommends that they cast their net on the right side of the boat, which they surely think is a ridiculous suggestion. Left side, right side — what does it matter to fish, who are going to swim wherever they want?

But when they do this, they are not able to haul in the net because there are so many fish. Peter realizes that the stranger on the beach is Jesus, so he jumps into the sea and swims to shore. The rest of the disciples haul the loaded net to shore, and there Jesus cooks them breakfast. In a time of exhaustion and stress, they discover that they are not alone. Jesus is with them.

Sheep devotion

After breakfast, Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” Jesus does not ask Peter about his willingness to put in long hours, make a nonstop effort and be pushed beyond his limits. Instead, Jesus asks him about the love that Peter has for Jesus.

Peter says, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” And Jesus says to him, “Feed my lambs.” For Jesus, love for him is not expressed by sitting around and thinking about how great Jesus is. Instead, love is expressed by actions that feed and care for others — people that Jesus describes as “my lambs.” Jesus is calling us to a new norm — the norm of sheep devotion.

But Jesus is not finished with Peter. A second time he says to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter says to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus says to him, “Tend my sheep.” And then Jesus says a third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Jesus is asking Peter to answer him three times, probably because just a few days earlier Peter had denied Jesus three times. So each of these answers has the effect of canceling out one of Peter’s denials.

Peter feels hurt because Jesus asks him the third time, “Do you love me?” No doubt he feels guilty and ashamed as well. But Peter answers Jesus, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus doesn’t do anything to make him feel more guilty or ashamed; he doesn’t throw Peter’s mistakes in his face; he doesn’t remind him of his failures and make him feel even worse about himself. Instead, he simply says, “Feed my sheep.” With these words, Jesus forgives Peter and puts him back on the right path. He establishes for Peter the norm of sheep devotion.

Jesus meets us and nourishes us

This can be our norm as well, as we seek to follow Jesus today. And we can do this knowing that we have been forgiven and restored by Jesus. As followers of Christ, we don’t have to cuddle real sheep, as the pastor’s daughter did in Scotland. But we are challenged to show our love for Jesus by caring for his people in the world.

Before exploring this assignment, notice that scripture never insists that we do this work all by ourselves. In John 21, Jesus gives the disciples the instructions they need in order to pull in a net full of fish, and then he cooks them breakfast on the beach. He does not demand long hours and nonstop effort. He does not treat them like ammunition, until they are exhausted and discarded.

No, Jesus meets his disciples and nourishes them. He does the same for us, so that we can be successful as we feed, tend and care for his lambs. The risen Jesus always meets us before he gives us our work assignment, and then he nourishes us so that we can be strong enough to do what he asks. Jesus promises, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them,”² and he says to his followers, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”³ Jesus always meets us and nourishes us.

Loving Jesus by caring for people

Once strengthened by Jesus, we can feed his sheep in a variety of ways. For starters, we can care for the children of the church, from babies in the nursery through students in high

school. Caring means acknowledging children, including them and protecting them.

We acknowledge children by “getting to know them,” writes Tricia Brown for *United Methodist Communications*. “Talk to them. Learn what they enjoy doing. Show interest in who they are.” We can find ways to include children in worship by allowing them to serve as ushers, greeters, readers and singers. And we can protect them by making sure that every aspect of a child’s experience in church is a safe one. This means that we put “policies and procedures in place to ensure that those who are working with children are properly approved and trained,” writes Brown.⁴ Given the many dangers that children face today, we should always live by the norm of sheep devotion.

We also feed the sheep of Jesus by working for the good of our neighbors, especially around the issue of affordable housing. As rents and housing prices continue to rise, our communities will suffer — we will not have affordable housing for people who care for seniors in our nursing homes, serve food in our restaurants, police our streets and teach in our schools. Fighting for the preservation and expansion of affordable housing is an important way for us to tend Christ’s sheep. Fortunately, many Christians are involved in this work by volunteering with Habitat for Humanity, Rebuilding Together and a variety of other housing organizations.

Caring for children and caring for our neighbors are important ways of feeding the sheep. They show the world that we truly love Jesus and that we are responding to his call: “Follow me.” Tending the sheep of Jesus is not always easy work, and it can push us in directions that we may not want to go. But at the end of the day, it draws us closer to Jesus and to each other.

The norm of work devotion makes our jobs the central part of our existence, and it leaves us exhausted. But the norm of sheep devotion? That keeps Jesus at the center, and it gives us a life worth living.

1 Dorcas Cheng-Tozun, “You are how much you work,” *Christianity Today*, August 24, 2015, www.christianitytoday.com/women/2015/august/you-are-how-much-you-work.html.

2 Matthew 18:20.

3 John 6:35.

4 Tricia Brown, “How to care for the children in your congregation,” *United Methodist Communications*, www.umcom.org/learn/how-to-care-for-the-children-in-your-congregation.

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