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Herding Cats

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Herding Cats

I have heard the expression "herding cats" and have used it myself in describing the difficulty of attempting to organize, guide, or in some manner bring to unity a group of individuals who value their independence rather than their reliance upon one another or their responsibilities for a common good. Cats do not generally run in packs, and we humans can sometimes resemble them in our insistence on remaining in control.

God is often described as the Good Shepherd, which presumes that there are flocks - of sheep. Sheep do tend to remain in flocks, and those who wander off are identified as strays. Not many of us see ourselves, at least in most aspects of our lives, as sheep. Though we might belong to teams, clubs, and organizations, we can also be as independent and as self-led as cats. How does God go about "herding cats" in such a way as to be given the title "Good Shepherd?"

I have no memories of being forced to join a flock of sheep. Most of us have experiences, if we choose to reflect, of having been influenced in making decisions about engaging in common enterprises, from a parents' club, to an exercise group, to faith-sharing meetings, or to any number of possible organizations. We were influenced by what friends or those who know us said or indicated; we have been influenced by what we have read or seen in publications or other media; and we have been influenced at times by some strong attractions or desires from within us. Though we might have been subjected to pressures from without or within, we made the decisions in relative freedom to join groups in which we would not be the sole decision-makers. We decided that we could help achieve something of value together with others that we, as independent individuals, could not bring about on our own.

God herds us gently, even if sometimes with frequent reminders. Most of the guidance we receive is by way of invitation, not command, and quite frequently by means of enlightening both our minds and our hearts so that we resonate with the invitations that are for our own welfare and that of others. Most shepherds, most herders of any kind, take care of their flocks partly for their own benefit. The Good Shepherd only has our best interests in mind. We retain our freedom, including at those times when "greener grass on the other side of the fence" appears to us as the better option, and we stray from the integrity that is ours when mind and heart are in accord, and also stray from the communities where our integrity is supported.

Music that delights us is not imposed; we recognize without needing explanations or descriptions the kinds of sounds that encourage, inspire, and please us. Though we might resemble cats in that each of us likes our own particular kinds of music, all of us recognize inspiration and invitations that somehow bring us together with others in shared events, common projects, and communal organizations of every size and type where the "music" of each harmonizes with others. The Good Shepherd works with us at least as much from the inside as from without. When we respond to the "sounds" of the suggestions in our minds that bring hope, trust, and love, we experience the One who herds. Likewise, when we interpret the suggestions, demands even, of other persons and of circumstances outside us as also coinciding with hope, trust, and love, we experience the Good Shepherd.

Whatever metaphorical names we might use for ourselves, God knows well how to call us each by name to the individual and communal decisions that give us life to the full. For our sakes, God has taken on the role of "herding cats."