

In my family, you will occasionally hear the phrase, “You can’t kill the rooster.”

This is a nod to an utterly profanity-laced essay by *This American Life*’s David Sedaris.

If you decide to read it, don’t you dare tell anyone your pastor told you about it.

When I first read this essay, I immediately made a copy for my mother, apologized for the profanity (it really is spectacularly obscene) and said, “When you read this, tell me if it doesn’t remind you of someone.”

At that time one of my siblings, who shall remain nameless, enjoyed a rather hard-partying, hard-drinking, hard-fighting lifestyle and this was to whom I was referring.

So the moniker, “the rooster” came in our family to refer to whomever was engaged in the most anti-social behavior at the time.

And then my sister grew up.

I have four siblings and the youngest, my sister, is seven years younger than me, and as older siblings through the years have more or less unanimously agreed, the same people did not raise her that raised me. I mean, they may have the same social security numbers, but they are not the same people.

As a result, my sister and my mother and father have a completely different relationship with each other than any of the rest of us do – and she says things to them that frankly make my jaw hit the floor.

I was at my parents’ house one day and my mother was mildly lamenting some minor issue and my when my sister came in the room she had clearly already heard about said issue so she tartly said, “There is nothing you can do about it and you may as well shut your !@#\$ pie-hole, woman.”

My mother responded with an equally ascerbic rejoinder, and I was left sitting there scratching my head saying, “Who ARE you people?”

I know, it’s a lovely mother’s day image, isn’t it?

There’s one in every family.

In fact, these days I think it’s something of a cause celebre to be the black sheep of any group. We prize individuality and gumption.

But the origin of the phrase is a little darker, no pun intended.

To be a black sheep in years gone by was a bit more painful.

It was to be the one who was not like the others, and to have that difference be a point of pain.

It was to be the one who was expected to make a bad end.

In one of my sojourns in Scotland I had the occasion to spend a little time with a sheep farmer and I learned a few things about sheep.

The wool of black sheep won’t take dye, did you know that?

And so, the wool of a black sheep was more or less worthless – there wasn’t a treatment that could be done to it to make it accept dye and so it couldn’t be used to make yarn and so in the utter pragmatism of the life of a sheep farmer, when a ewe gave birth to sheep, if there was a black lamb, it’s destiny was pretty much sealed. That lamb would wind up in the stew.

So, historically the moniker of black sheep has a bit harsher connotation than our rather warm feelings toward it today.

What's so interesting to me, though, about the biblical image of the shepherd is how ubiquitous it is. Whether in the Old Testament or the New, there is no shortage of shepherd imagery.

Jesus calls himself the good shepherd and he picks up the imagery of the 23rd psalm and in so doing, he picks up the history of King David, who was a shepherd boy himself.

What's so very odd about that is that the shepherds of the ancient near east were sort of the hard-bitten, rough-neck cowboys of their day. Think wild west and you've got the right image.

These are the folks who have skin tanned like leather from exposure to the elements, who might embody all the romance and derring-do of tough-guy scenarios, but make no mistake about it, you wouldn't want your daughter to marry one.

It's fine to talk about shepherds and so forth in the scriptures, but make no mistake about it, when you're talking about shepherds, you're talking about the black sheep.

These are the guys who take the high-risk professions because there isn't an alternative for them.

So I've always found it a little bit surprising that Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd to talk about himself.

Given all that is laced through that image, what a surprising choice.

Shouldn't he have picked a different metaphor?

Something a little kindlier seeming?

Maybe one that had a little more social acceptance?

After all, the first step toward making something mainstream is to make it palatable, isn't it?

Maybe the good sheep-dog is more like it.

You know, cuddly, loyal, hard-working, and most importantly, won't piddle on the rug.

That is certainly what the establishment wanted from Jesus, wasn't it?

The establishment wanted a company guy, someone who could understand the insider language of faith, reinforce their own images of themselves, and not ruffle the feathers of the powerful, big donors, and political machine.

And that's not Jesus.

Of course, there was a minority opinion too – they sort of wanted the opposite – they wanted a violent man who would leave a path of smoldering ruins where authority once lay, death and destruction in his wake for all who opposed him.

Think wolf and you've got the image.

And yet, that's not Jesus either.

It does leave one wondering, "Why all the barnyard imagery," though doesn't it?

Indeed, these passages from John can seem somewhat problematic with the language of who gets to the father, and how.

Indeed, I worry sometimes that when we read these passages that are so clear as to Jesus' role as the good shepherd, that they might be read in an exclusive way that reinforces exactly the *wrong* image, that if we conform to a particular norm of what entails a Christian life that we will somehow be rewarded with life after we die – and that if we do not conform to this notion – if we are person of little faith, or different faith, that our fate is sealed by God who weighs what sort of sheep we are and makes a determination as to what happens to us next.

That couldn't really be further from the point. If we read on in John's tenth chapter, we see where Jesus himself says, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold."

So that's not the point – Jesus isn't looking for sheep that are, well, sheepish. He's making a point about what sort of God we're talking about here.

It's the sort of God who goes to the lengths that a shepherd goes to in order to make sure that not one single sheep goes missing, that not one single sheep is left behind, that not one single sheep falls prey to the wolves.

Because you do know there are ravenous wolves out there, don't you?

The wolves have names. Their names are poverty, racism, homophobia, elitism. The wolves have names like addiction and mental illness and substance abuse.

The wolves have names like spousal abuse and economic dependency. The wolves have names like human trafficking and prostitution.

There are lots of wolves out there, but the good shepherd won't give up on any of the sheep. The good shepherd never stops seeking the lost sheep and the hurt sheep and the well, frankly, the sheepish sheep.

And of course, when the wolves slaver over separating out the black sheep, waiting for it to be left to be the one that is abandoned because it is not like the others, it can be tempting to throw the black sheep to the wolves.

So what is a good shepherd to do?

Let me tell you a story.

My friend Sherri Hausser and I were traveling to Iona together one time. Iona is a tiny island at the southernmost tip of the inner Hebrides. Several of us have been there, and the one thing I think we all agree on is that there it takes forever to get there... from

Edinburgh, one takes a train to Oban, wherein one boards a ferry to the island Mull, and then rides a bus down a single-track road to the ferry dock in Fionnphort to take one additional ferry to cross over to the island.

What is a single track road, you may be asking?

It is a one lane road that is barely wide enough for one car to drive down with periodic bump-outs to allow cars to pull over so they can pass one another.

On Mull, the passenger cars share this with lorries carrying the timber back to the north part of the island. One drives at one's peril. It is a harrowing experience, and it primes you so that when you get to Iona, you are ready for a spiritual experience.

So I was driving my friend Elinor's little Mazda station-wagon down this winding road when Sherri spotted a sign for an organic farm coming up on the left.

Sherri loves all things organic, local and natural, and I have come to be as well, but at that stage of my life, I was still perfectly comfortable with Bovine Growth Hormone and I thought yellow dye #5 was perfectly delicious.

"No," I said.

"Yes," she said.

"Okay," I said. (I don't enjoy conflict and we were headed that way.)

So, off the main road we went, in search of an organic farm – why, to this day, I still don't know.

But when we worked our way several miles through roads that were little more than ruts, we found our way to a farmyard outside of several stone barns that formed a courtyard.

One had a sign that said, "Ardalanish Farm Store."

So we got out of the car and went in, I was sort of expecting to find some goat cheese or something, or an Irn-bru to fortify myself, and when we went in the door, what we saw were shelves of the most stunning blankets and sweaters and scarves in rich shades of brown and dark gray and sort of burnt-orange red.

The sales clerk looked up as we came in and said, “Welcome.”

We looked around and read the placards that said, “All of our wool is dye-free and organic.”

I was intrigued. There were these rich colors, but it was dye-free.

So I asked the clerk. Instead of answering, she said, “Come with me.”

We walked outside and up a short path to the farmhouse and beyond it was a pasture.

“Do you notice anything special,” she asked?

“Yes,” I replied, “These sheep are all different colors.”

And they were. They were black and brown and sort of reddish, just like the blankets and sweaters in the store.

“Come on back down and I’ll show you the looms,” she said.

The original owner of the loom had been a weaver in Glasgow who decided to retire and discovered that there was no market for his loom in the United Kingdom as most of the textile industry had left the country. So, despairing of selling his loom and equipment, he decided to give them up for scrap. This farmer read the ad and called him and said, “I can’t afford to buy your loom, but if you’re really giving it away for scrap, could I have the whole thing? I have an interest in learning to weave.”

It turned out that the farmer, who himself marched to the beat of his own drummer, had a soft spot in his heart for the black sheep and knowing the fate of the black lambs, put out the word that if a black lamb was born, he would buy it.

The wool of black sheep doesn't take dye.

The wool of black sheep doesn't need dye. It is beautiful exactly as it is.

The master weaver takes the wool of the black sheep and uses it to create something that couldn't be made in any other way.

That is the good shepherd.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.