

I wish I had a better connection to this whole “good shepherd” thing, but of all the animals we had on the farm growing up between cows and pigs, dogs and cats, and, of course, the unwelcomed guests of mice and bats; sheep never made an appearance. So, the closest I can get to understanding this whole shepherd thing is when I took my first cow to the county fair. His name was Kirby, and for you, baseball fans, he was named after, perhaps, the best Minnesota Twins hitter of all time in Kirby Puckett.

But the calf, Kirby, and I got close over time. He was my first set of chores to do as a child. He was my first chance to show I could handle dreaded responsibility. He was my first pet of sorts. So, for a while, I had to wake up early to feed him milk from a large bottle that took him forever, and then some, to suckle down. I had to clean up the straw in his pen when I got home from school to keep *his* home as nice as possible. Then there would be the times I would have to bring him out to practice walking him around the yard for our future appearance at the biggest show in town: the Wyandot County Fair.

It so happened that Kirby and I developed a good enough working-relationship to the point that we won the showmanship competition, which basically just focused on how well Kirby and I walked around together and

stage presence and professionalism or whatever else. Now when it came to the actual competition that just focused on Kirby with his shape and build, he didn't do so well there.

Of course, regardless, of how well your cow did, more often than not, at the end of the fair, you had to take your cow back into the same showroom and stand there with your cow as an auctioneer rattled off at a vocal equivalent of a hundred-miles-per-hour all these increasing dollar amounts. And once the bidders stopped raising their hands and the auctioneer's voice came to a screeching halt, the time had come for your cow to be taken away from you. Now, to avoid further embarrassment, I will not tell you how much I cried afterwards, when I looked out and saw Kirby in the midst of so many other cows like him behind a fence. That's the problem with the whole thing: you, actually, start to care. You actually start to develop a relationship, of sorts. You start to experience these feelings that churn in your very soul at a rate faster than any auctioneer can ever touch.

Except no matter how much I can make the whole thing sound so incredibly cute from years ago, the story has limits when trying to make it come anywhere close to God. And even the whole "good shepherd" thing has its shortfalls. For starters, for all the times I had to wrap a rope around Kirby's

face to lead him around the yard, to, basically, force him outside his comfort zone and develop a rigid routine to walk right in-step with me; God does not operate that way.

It would be nice if God just controlled our every movement, like a shepherding puppet-master, Who would dictate us into movements of sacrifice and kindness and mercy all the time, and thereby giving up on the whole just staying inside the comforts of what we know and cherish, not to mention all the other selfishness, pride, and narrow-minded behavior along the way. And if any judge were to come up to us at the end of the whole thing they would give us a ribbon of pure gold and not just say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” but instead, “Perfect life, impeccable disciple of Jesus Christ!”

It would be nice if God worked that way, but that’s not the working-relationship God has in mind with us. Evidently God loves us far too much to obsessively control our every move, as if we can do no good otherwise; because God, evidently, trusts that we are more than capable of being able to pull it off out of our own free will. But, don’t worry, God made a promise before we became part of any flock to stay right by our side every step of the way, down whatever path we may take, far closer to us than any shepherd can ever get.

Which brings me to another reality down on the farm, when, at one point for us, these massive winds took down the fences outside our barn and the cows ran away down the country road. Now, eventually, we got them back, but when it comes to God: we can run as far away as we want. We can run away from our problems, from our jobs, even, at times, we want to run away from God. But no matter how far we run, God is gonna be *there* too. It may seem obvious, but we cannot outrun God's boundless love for us. We also cannot run away from the reality that this God cares absolutely everyone, including the ones we wish were not included in any flock of *Animalia* whatsoever, because this God is fiercely determined to not lose anyone ever.

That's the thing: this God cares about us so much to the point of a cross. This God developed a relationship with us even before the waters of baptism, a relationship that God says nothing that can happen in all creation, not even death itself, stands a chance to tear that precious relationship apart. This is the God who will still walk beside us even in the darkest valley, all the way into a Kingdom with no more sorrow, no more obsessive control, no more pain at all; just life in all its pure fulness made possible by the only shepherding companion that matters in Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, now and forevermore. And for Him, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen.