

The Shepherd, Dog and Sheep Ballet

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When I was in England several years ago, I picked up a postcard that has become a favorite of mine. On the front of the card, a black and white Border collie is sitting in a courtroom, surrounded by a judge (English wig and all) and a jury (not a jury of the dog's peers, which would be dogs of course, but a jury of people.) The caption on the card reads, "At the Sheep Dog Trial." The reason that card makes me laugh, again and again, is because the first time I ever heard about a "dog trial" I too thought of jury boxes, judge's gavels, and witness chairs.



Border Collie Nightmare #1

But of course a sheep dog "trial" is actually a competition, begun centuries ago in Great Britain when shepherds who brought their sheep to market began designing contests to determine which dog and handler was the best at moving sheep. And although the details of the competition have changed through the years, the fundamentals have remained the same. If you've seen that old movie, Babe, you know the basics.

Here is what it's like: If you brought a folding chair, you sit, or if not, you stand, out in an open field. There are thirty to fifty dogs milling around, and temporary fencing, usually joined to more permanent fencing, setting off the course where the competition is being held. Way up on the hill is a large flock of sheep, but you can't really see them, and neither can the dogs. They are kept out of sight so as not to confuse the dog that will come looking, not for the whole flock, but for the five or seven that have been set out for the fetch. Down near you there is a solitary fence post driven into the ground. That is the "handler's post," where the shepherd must remain through the first part of the competition, as the dog does the work. The handler can direct the dog with whistles or with words, but cannot touch dog or sheep.

It is striking how quiet a sheep dog trial is, especially with so many dogs around. But the Border collies who are waiting their turn to compete aren't running around or barking. In fact, they usually line up along the fence, each one watching silently and intently as the

dog who is “up” works. Every time I see it, I imagine the dogs are taking notes so as to be better prepared when their turn comes.

When the handler steps to the post with a dog, there is a hint of a partnership. The dog is eager to go, but watching intently for the handler’s signal. Then with an almost imperceptible gesture, the handler sends the dog, and the nature of the partnership becomes visible. If it is a strong one, then off the dog goes, in a flash of black and white. Even without seeing sheep, she believes, because the handler said so, that there will be some out there to bring home. And a skilled dog keeps the circle widening as she goes, scanning until she spots the flock. At that moment, she curves in, coming up above and behind, so the sheep are now between her and the handler. Then she stops, sometimes even flopping down, catching her breath, calming the sheep, and sizing up the situation. When she rises, her eyes are fixed on the flock in that famous Border collie stare, and the sheep become the third partner in the work. For the next fifteen minutes to twenty minutes, the sheep, dog, and handler will move as if in a ballet. A good dog needs very few commands; a good handler gives very few. A good dog moves the sheep gently, and a well gathered flock stays together as it moves through the course.

The word I bring from my church world that seems big enough to hold these moments, watching a good dog and a good handler move good sheep, is “sacred.” The work is demanding and focused, and the dog is doing what she was born to do. The handler trusts the dog, and the dog trusts the handler, and neither can do the work alone or without that trust. And the sheep are there too, and calm. So calm in fact that, although they do not actually lie down in the green pastures, they will stop occasionally to grab a mouthful of grass as the dog moves them along. It is as if the sheep, and the handler, and the dog have become, in those moments, colleagues. And the whole point is to bring the flock home, safe into the fold.

I have never tired of watching this work, even when it goes wrong, and the dog gets impatient, or the handler overcorrects, or the sheep scatter. I suspect that the more completely I can be present to those moments of partnership, the more deeply I will understand my own place in the world.

On my own farm, I have experienced that same partnership. Of course, I am not the handler that those who compete are, and my dogs are farm dogs and not trial dogs. My sheep have taken their own notes, and they know every weakness of each dog. But there are still moments, when I send the dog, and the dog trusts me, and the sheep come trotting toward the barn with the setting sun glowing on their fleeces, when I do catch just a glimpse of my own place in the world- as a shepherd, as a pastor, as a part of creation, and as a beloved child of God.