

Sermon 9 14 & 15 19

I read our gospel for today, and I thought about the name of our church, and I've looked up at our beautiful stained glass window so many times (that's the first thing I see when I'm looking out from the altar!) with the Good Shepherd (Jesus) caring for the sheep so lovingly, and this week I thought, "Wait a minute! Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He's caring for his flock. And sometimes a sheep gets lost. And Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has to, wants to, go off looking for that sheep and he finds that sheep because he loves that sheep. "*All we like sheep have gone astray*" etc. And I know that's true. We've all gone astray. *But, am I a sheep?* I don't know if I wanna be a sheep? Hmmm... We'll get back to that.

When I teach our younger kids about the Eucharist, I use a lesson from a Sunday School curriculum called The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. It's very similar to Godly Play, another curriculum. In the lesson of the Good Shepherd, there are little wooden sheep figures, and a shepherd figure, and a round wooden fence sheep fold, and a wooden wolf figure, and a green felt mat to put all on the floor, with felt forms to indicate a pond and some hills. I start with all the sheep in the fold, and the shepherd leads them out of the fold. *And the shepherd knows each of their names!* And he leads them near cool clear water, and he leads them on a narrow path between some hills, and he leads them away from where the

wolf is hiding in the hills (gotta watch out for that wolf!), and he eventually leads them back home to their sheep fold. The sheep know the Good Shepherd will take care of them and that he loves them.

And I find if you tell that story enough times, the children automatically begin to give the sheep names and they identify with the sheep. “That sheep’s name is Mikey!” “Like me!” And eventually, “That’s me!” It just happens.

Now this doesn’t seem to bother the children, but aren’t sheep supposed to be kinda dumb? I’m an adult! I don’t wanna be dumb! I don’t wanna think of myself as dumb!

So I went to that font of information, the internet, and I asked the question, “Are sheep unintelligent?”

Well guess what?! They’re NOT! Sheep are smart!” According to the BBC, the journal *Nature* researched this. Sheep can remember the faces of more than 50 other sheep and can even recognize a familiar human face. They can form friendships with each other. They can even decide to feel affectionate towards humans. Female sheep were even found to have opinions about what makes a ram attractive!

Sheep can navigate and remember mazes. Their flocking instinct is actually a clever defense mechanism. Safety in numbers. Scientists at the University of Cambridge found that sheep could

learn to navigate challenges in the same way humans and primates do.

Sheep form bonds and connections. They display joyful behaviors. There's a wonderful video of a lamb just jumping around - for no good reason, other than he was happy! Just jumping around...

Researchers in Australia found that if a sheep is sick it knows enough to seek out the plants that can help it feel better.

In other words, sheep are not stupid. Even our kids know that! Sheep don't just hang around waiting to be turned into sweaters and lamb chops! Sheep are smart! Which makes me feel a lot better about Jesus comparing us to sheep. (I'm sorry to say it doesn't make me feel better about my love of lamb chops! But oh well...)

The other factor in this parable that is so interesting is that God clearly values repentance — *particularly* values repentance. “I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” I think the key phrase there is “persons who *need* no repentance.” Who's that?!?! Nobody I know! We *all* need repentance!

Jesus is acknowledging that a repentant person has further to travel, more work to do to become right with God. I think Jesus is

also assuming that there are more sinners out there than perfect people - more repentance is needed. More forgiveness is needed. Let's face it, we all need to repent and we all need to forgive. And God is ready to welcome it all.

In our epistle, Paul refers to himself as “the foremost sinner” — a big name sinner — a well known sinner among his people. Paul figured that as a former “blasphemer, persecutor and man of violence,” a supporter of killing the followers of Jesus Christ, he was God's foremost/best choice to become a Christian. Remember, Paul just stood there, holding the cloaks of all those who stoned Stephen? Paul looked on. And then, after that, he was struck by a great light on the road to Damascus and God called him.

Paul was smart. He was articulate, and as a Roman citizen AND a Jew, he commanded respect. He knew his turn-around would be a big deal - and it was. He was the worst, and that's why he became the most notable, so that, as he said, Jesus Christ could, with him, “display the utmost patience,” making him an example. “If Jesus can save me, anyone can be saved!”

I have come to love Paul. He used to exasperate me. Oh my God! All that ego! But now I love him. I wouldn't want to live with him - too much noise and energy, like a perpetually hyperactive adolescent — but there is something wonderfully lovable about him.

And finally, after all this talk of acceptance of our sins and our repeated need for forgiveness, over and over again, I want to end with the final prayer of our Psalm, Psalm 51. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and *renew* a right spirit within me.” What a great prayer! We can say it every day, and say it again the next day! We need to ask God to do this for us - over and over and over again - to *renew* us. “Create in us, and re-create in us clean hearts, O God. Please renew us over and over again. Renew right spirits within us. I wanna be one of your sheep. lead us home to your sheep fold.”
Amen.

(I also told a little story about our son Andy when he was in his first Christmas pageant. He was dressed as a sheep. As he walked down the aisle in our church, eyes wide, all the way down the aisle, he softly “baaaaa’d.” He was very committed to his role. May we older sheep be just as committed!)

