

Sermon 5 3 20

You may have noticed that our readings for this Sunday tend to cast us in the role of SHEEP. I, for one, don't appreciate being referred to as a sheep! I love thinking of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but us as sheep? I dunno...

I think of sheep as being brainless - maybe cuddly, but brainless nevertheless. I'm not real flattered when Jesus refers to us as sheep. But then as I thought about it I thought, "I've got to be fair about this. What do I really know about sheep?" Not much apparently. Everyone Jesus and his disciples spoke to were familiar with sheep. They were also familiar with shepherds. How familiar was I?

So, off to the internet to do a little research. What did I learn? Quite a lot! Sheep are animals that are usually thought of as meek. They are quiet and gentle. In a herd, the sheep tend to listen to the shepherd, doing as he or she indicates. Because of their obedient nature, sheep are popular animals, relatively easy to raise. Sheep are also gregarious and like to live together in groups, which automatically protects them from predators. The portrayal of sheep in the movie "Babe" is pretty accurate. You know, the movie where Babe the pig makes friends with the sheep and becomes a shepherd. The lesson there is that the best sheep herders are sheep friends.

Sheep are surprisingly intelligent, with impressive memory and recognition skills. They build friendships, stick up for one another in fights, and feel sad when their friends go away. They can recognize and remember at least 50 individual faces for more than 2 years - which is as long or longer than many humans! Sheep can differentiate between facial expressions and they prefer a smile to a frown. They can find their way out of a maze, and are especially encouraged if they know that they have sheep friends waiting for them at the exit. They can be playful and joyful.

A group of rams were observed for three years by a researcher from the University of California. The rams established firm friendships and looked out for one another in times of stress: "some intervened on behalf of weaker colleagues and supported each other in fights." It was found that sheep are capable of experiencing "a whole range of feelings, from fear to anger, despair, boredom and happiness."

Lest we think sheep are totally docile, they can deliver a painful kick, especially if they are defending their young. They can also run fast and scale steep cliffs. Finally, they have great peripheral vision. They can see virtually behind themselves without turning their heads! Sheep are as smart as most dogs, but less smart than pigs... hence the success of Babe the pig as a leader.

So, I guess being compared to sheep is *not* an insult. And certainly, being a member of a herd can be seen as common sense. Perhaps the more cooperative, communal way in which the earliest Christians lived, holding all things in common and distributing their earnings to all as any had need, as the book of Acts tells us, was admirable and helped to swell their numbers. As the history of communes or utopian communities in this country tells us, it can be an odd way of life to maintain, living outside of competition, but it can be done and done well. And, as Acts tells us, day by day, the Lord added to their number. However, the Christian commune in Jerusalem apparently ended at some point, perhaps with the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70.

“The Lord is my shepherd...” There are lots of different versions of the 23rd Psalm out there. I know most of us are used to the one we hear repeated from the King James version of the Bible. For our service today I kept the one from the version of the Bible we use for our readings, the New Revised Standard Version — just to wake us up a little. The 23rd Psalm reminds us of all the benefits of following a *good* shepherd: we need not be in want, Jesus leads us along right pathways, and even as we approach the end of our lives, we don’t need to fear, because Jesus is with us. He cares for us now and forever with goodness and mercy. I like being a member of Jesus’ flock!

Our Epistle talks about going astray like sheep, but if, like most smart sheep we pay attention to our shepherd, going astray needn’t happen. What is somewhat disturbing about our epistle is that it seems as though it’s giving us credit for suffering unjustly, and I’m sure we do get credit for that but it doesn’t mean that we should *seek* to suffer unjustly. I don’t think God gives us credit for being masochists! But this letter was undoubtedly reassuring for those who were suffering every day for their beliefs.

And besides, what of the original question I posed? Does God want us to be mindless followers? I’m sure we’re not! I should think the vast breadth and the

amazing, wonderful depth of Christian thought over the past 2000 years answers that question for us.

God wants us to be smart members of a smart flock of smart beings - who we are created to be. God *wants* us to think theologically. God *wants* us to question and search. God is the creator of the human brain. If God didn't want us to use our brains, don't you think God would have just stuck mindless calculators in our heads? Don't you think God would have gone much further than the 10 commandments and emblazoned everything we are supposed to believe in - just so - perfectly etched and outlined in stone or on papyrus somewhere for us? And leave us with no doubts, no questions?

Oh NO! We don't get off that easy. God wants us to think for ourselves. God gave us the imaginations, the brains to do that. Our Bible is full of contradictions, full of more than one way to explain things. Right from the beginning: Genesis gives us *two* creation stories. TWO! We are meant to read them both. We are meant to be discerning and thoughtful. We are meant to be just enough smarter than sheep to think for ourselves. God isn't going to spoon feed us. Nope!

God created us to *choose* to love God. God created us to *choose* to follow Jesus. God created us to be smart sheep!