

4th Sunday of Easter “On Sheep and Shepherds”

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About eleven years ago, my parents and I traveled together to Britain. We traveled through Scotland, Wales and England. The one creature of all of God’s creation that we saw the most was sheep. Sometimes sheep would just wander on the road in front of your car and stare at you. You could stop, honk your horn, wave your hands, and the sheep would still just look at you, not moving one bit. If you ask them to please move, they shake their heads and say “baaaa”.

Who here has ever been around sheep? What is your impression of sheep? In my experience, anyone who has been around sheep will tell you that although they have some endearing qualities, like lamb chops, they are not the brightest creature in the animal kingdom. They are noisy, goofy, awkward, smelly, will follow the crowd right off the cliff at times. People who know about sheep will tell you that they are typically a can short of a six pack or a taco short of a meal deal.

Now Jesus this Sunday compares the human race to sheep. This doesn’t seem like much of a compliment, does it? Who wants to be compared to a sheep, raise your hand! As a race, perhaps our Lord considers us to be rather noisy, goofy, awkward, smelly, and stupid at times. And, although this may be a fair critique judging what I read in the newspapers each day, during the Easter Season it is also very Good News that Jesus reveals himself to us as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for us sheep, even if we feel undeserving of this...especially if we feel undeserving of this.

Personally, I find the image of being a sheep rather comforting. When I am honest with myself, I know that there are areas in my life that are noisy, goofy, awkward, smelly and stupid. Don’t we all? Sometimes any of us can be like that sheep in the road staring blindly and refusing to budge. Sometimes it is good to ask ourselves, what are the areas of our lives that we are like obedient sheep who listen to the Lord’s voice? Sometimes it is good to ask ourselves, what are the areas of our lives that we are not obedient to Jesus’ voice, standing defiantly refusing to budge? These are good questions for us to ask ourselves this weekend I think.

Of course, as much as I would like to stay with the metaphor of being sheep of a pasture, where this analogy breaks down is our configuration to Christ in baptism. The sacrament of baptism calls us to be brothers and sisters of the Lord, participating in his divine offices of priest, prophet and king. We are therefore also called to be shepherds in the world in which we live, not just sheep. We participate in the priestly office by worshiping God like we are doing today. We participate in the prophetic office of Jesus by being a proud witness of our discipleship to others outside these walls. We participate in the kingly office of Jesus by being an extension of the Lord’s governing power on earth, by taking a stand for what is right and by caring about those in need or on the peripheries. And so yes, by our baptism, we are called to be sheep of the Lord’s pasture who know the Lord’s voice and follow him. This is a prerequisite of discipleship. However, by our baptism, discipleship also calls us to be shepherds in our world, leading others to Christ by the example of our lives.

Good Shepherd Sunday can invite us to ask: Who are the people in my life that I have been called to be a good shepherd to? Who are the people in my life I am called to be a better shepherd to? Who have I led to Christ by the example of my life? These can be rewarding questions. And, at times, these can also be haunting questions. However, I think Good Shepherd Sunday can also be an invitation to make a small change here or there to become better shepherds to the people in our lives, perhaps starting with the person we see in the mirror! Starting with ourselves is a good idea because, if we are not nurturing our own faith life, how can we be an effective witness to others?

And so, my friends, on Good Shepherd Sunday we recognize that Jesus is our shepherd. If Jesus is our shepherd, this means we are called to be good sheep under his care following his voice. We can ask ourselves: what does that look like for us this week? On the other hand, because of our baptism, it is always important to remember that we have been configured to Christ. This means we are also called to be shepherds who are fed by Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And so, yes, we are also called to be shepherds. The invitation this Sunday: be a good one.