

4th Sunday of Easter “On Sheep and Shepherds”

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About seventeen 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. Very stubborn creatures!

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, and 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 French fry 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. However, this seems to be a fair critique judging from what we see in the news each day. During the Easter Season it is very Good News that Jesus reveals himself to us as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, even if we feel undeserving of this...especially when 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 also 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.

I always find it fascinating that the word pastor is derived from the word for shepherd. In the rite of ordination to the episcopacy, the new bishop is even given a shepherd’s staff called a crosier. What this means is, by ordination, bishops are called to reflect the Good Shepherd in our ministry. And, in my experience, most of the time we do. But here is the rub. There have only been two people in the world who were born without sin, and you and I are not them. What does this mean for priests and bishops? Our configuration to Christ in the sacrament of holy orders becomes evident only by the measure of how our lives and ministry reflect the Good Shepherd. A good rule of thumb when it comes to following priests and bishops. When what we say and do reflect what you read in the Gospel and the deposit of faith handed down to us, even if you are challenged by it, you would do well to follow pastors and bishops because this is how Jesus chose to shepherd his Church when he commissioned his Apostles and by extension their successors. However, when a priest or bishop acts contrary to the Gospel and the deposit of faith handed down to us, you would be very wise to be wary. For my part, as a new bishop, I simply

ask that you please pray for me that I will be a good bishop. I learned a long time ago that as much as I am called to shepherd you, you in fact also shepherd me by your witness of faith and by your holiness of life.

And so, my friends, on Good Shepherd Sunday it is good that we remember that we are all called by our baptism to follow the one true Shepherd. His name is Jesus. This week, we are also invited to count the ways that our lives are closely following Jesus' guidance and rejoice in that. This week, we would do well to also count the ways we are like that sheep in the middle of the road, stubbornly refusing to follow the Lord to our own peril. Perhaps, most of all, we can give thanks that our Good Shepherd gathers us into a flock, which we call the Church. Because we are all sinners, we are so much stronger together than we are by ourselves. To illustrate, if we are trying to make our way through life to a heavenly pasture, are we safer together or are we better off by ourselves when the terrain gets perilous, and the wolves start circling? When it comes to going to heaven, the Gospel makes it clear that it is foolish to try it alone. We cannot save ourselves. Only the Good Shepherd can save us. He does so through personal encounter and by gathering us into the flock he shepherds. We trust him because he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, nourishing us with his very self as food for the journey to our everlasting home.