

First Presbyterian Church
We're Not So Stinky
Rev. Catherine Oliver
April 22, 2018

The Text:

John 10:1-18 (Selected Verses)(NRSV)

Jesus the Good Shepherd

10 “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought them out, he goes ahead of them, to show them the way and the sheep follow because they know the sound of his voice.

Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

For “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.

The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

The Word of the Lord...

Often my daughter Claire and her friends enjoy meeting up in a local restaurant as a team to play Trivia. In Trivia you have an announcer who asks questions and teams try to get the correct answer. Claire is fortunate because her Trivia team is mostly made up of reporters and editors who work for the Birmingham News. So when you have a team like that, you answer a lot of questions correctly and sometimes win Trivia.

When Wednesday night Focus at First concludes and church activities slow down this summer, I hope that we can still meet up at least once a month. Cat thought it would be fun to form a FPC team and go play trivia. I love that idea.

So lets practice. Here is the first question:

What is God's favorite animal? Sheep, Cow, Goat?

Answer: Sheep.

How many times is the word sheep used in the old and new testaments?

200, 400, over 500 times!

Answer: over 500 times!

Sheep are mentioned more than 500 times in scripture, which is significantly more than any other animal. In both the old and new testaments, sheep are the favorite way of describing humankind and our relationship with God.

From this analogy I grew up believing that we are all God's sheep!

Cute little, fluffy, sheep.

I'm a sheep, you're a sheep, we are all God's sheep together!

But let me, let you in on a little secret.

Being labeled a sheep is NOT a compliment.

Gary Richmond, a writer, former zoo keeper and veterinary assistant at the L.A. zoo

Says this about sheep:

Of all animals, sheep require more care and supervision than any other domestic animal.

Sheep are compelled by mob instinct and fear. They simply can't help themselves.

When one sheep panics they all panic, one loud sound meow, they all freak out!

And because they have very low intelligence, (brains the size of a pea)

they run towards rather than away from danger!

He goes on:

Sheep get lost, lack focus, are directionally challenged which is why they need not just shepherds but also sheep dogs to guide them.

Finally, the writer goes on to say that sheep are very, very stinky!

Yep, Richmond describes sheep as walking Velcro strips.

He says that sheep love rolling around in the grass, especially grass that has really smelly things in it that I'm not going to mention from the pulpit.

Their wool absorbs every stinky substances found on earth and the smell only goes away after their coat is sheared and they are washed by their shepherd.

And so friends, it breaks my heart to say, this is how humankind is depicted in our relationship with God in scripture!?

This is how God sees us?

We're pea brained, fearful, stinky, sheep?

Yikes!

I don't believe that we're so stinky! And neither does God!

In my heart of hearts I believe that we all can act sheepishly at times.

Yet I also believe that God calls us to maturity, to become good shepherds or shepherdess, just like Jesus.

And that is what all of our scriptures are seeking to teach us!

So, if you will stay with me. If you will hold onto the image that yes, sometimes we act sheepishly.

Yes, sometimes we do really foolish, stinky things and act out of mob instinct and fear. But we are really not so stinky!

And here is the reason why.

From the beginning, and in the beginning we are created in God's image and that is very, very good.

In our heart of hearts, I believe we long to be faithful, kind and good shepherds and shepherdess..

And so I wonder, what does it look like when we become good shepherds and shepherdesses?

What would our city, nation and world look like if we could lead those who are feeling sheepish back to the sheepfold where they can feel safe and loved again?

I imagine humankind longing to be good leaders and teachers, good parents and hard workers who desire to lead our weary sheep to organically grown green pastures and let them drink from clear water that has not been contaminated by run off waste and fertilizers that short cut the growing process.

We long to be recycling shepherds, who care for our earth as we care for each other.

Today is Earth Day so I have to give voice to God's love for the earth as well as God's love for humankind.

Our scripture says the good shepherd or shepherdess calls their sheep by name and the sheep know the sound of their voice and so they follow, knowing that they will be protected and cared for.

When the good shepherd or shepherdess is around, the sheep feel safe.

This is good news!

It is important to feel safe.

But in our text today we also hear some bad news. That there are others.

Our text says that there are strangers that Jesus calls "hired hands".

And these do not care for their sheep. Instead they run away in times of danger.

And that there is a stranger who sits waiting to harm the sheep.

Week before last I came home after our Wednesday evening Focus at First. I saw a police car outside of my neighbor's house. I walked down to check on my neighbor. The P.O. was walking to his car and the neighbor was following.

"Hello, It's Catherine, are you o.k?"

Her back door had been kicked in, her home had been broken into while she was at work. Her voice trembled as she said, "I knew as soon as I walked in that

something was wrong. Someone had been in my home. My cats were acting strange. But at least I wasn't home and wasn't hurt. And yes, they took things. But they didn't take my most important keepsakes and they didn't hurt my cats."

My maternal shepherdess instincts went up.

A new neighbor, just 2 doors down from my home had been harmed by a thief! A thief had entered and ransacked her home.

It isn't easy to be a shepherdess. I didn't sleep well that night, I felt that I needed to stay awake, be protective of my neighbor and my neighborhood.

In theory and I guess biblically, it really is so much easier to just be a sheep. Since sheep are mentioned over 500 times in scripture God must have some reason to love us.

Especially when we are trying to be good sheep but have lost our way.

A few weeks ago I was feeling sheepish and grazing on a turkey and swiss Subway sandwich. I watched as so many people passed by a homeless man who was sitting outside of the Subway restaurant, begging.

Then one person, who was finely dressed, walking and talking on his cell phone stopped as the homeless man said something. Immediately he, the guy on the cell phone, turned around and never missed a beat. He came into the Subway. Placed an order. Then, this good shepherd left with a sandwich, chips, soda and even a cookie. He handed it to the man who had been begging, gave him a smile, a pat on the back and then kept walking.

Then, then, the most amazing thing happened. The homeless man who looked very surprised unwrapped his sandwich, raised his hands up, then bowed his head and appeared so be offering a blessing for the food he had received.

We are always called to be good shepherds.

Yet at times when we become sheepish, we must keep our wits about us and find good shepherds to lead and guide us.

When I feel sheepish, I have to choose wisely whose voice I am listening to and whose voice I will follow.

I choose to follow those who build me up, let me cry when I feel sad, make me laugh, give me strength and promise to pray for me.

And when I am The good shepherdess whose call is to lead others, I invite those feeling sheepish to reconsider their calling.

I believe that their calling to be a good shepherd or shepherdess is real. Just as real as mine.

No matter how hard their life has been. We are all called to mature, grow and learn from our life experiences.

As a good shepherdess it is my will to reflect back onto others the image of God that I see in them.

And God's image is so holy and beautiful.

While I believe Jesus calls us all to walk in his footsteps as good shepherds and shepherdess, I know he gets it when we sometimes become sheepish.

Our scripture this morning points to one of Jesus' favorite disciples, Peter.

Remember, Peter betrayed Jesus. He denied he even knew him. Peter had become sheepish. But Jesus didn't allow Peter to stay that way.

The risen Christ returned and commanded that Peter, move beyond his mistakes and brokenness. The risen Christ told Peter, "feed and care for my sheep."

As sheepish followers of the Christ, we know the sound of his voice.

As good shepherdess and shepherds, we are called to protect our sheep, even lay down our lives for them.

No one ever said that being a follower of Christ is going to be easy.

But it is worth the journey.

May God bless us all.

Amen.