

Sheep. Ubiquitous in the ancient world. Fluffy clouds of wool, the beginnings of our winter sweaters and mittens. Mentioned over 700 times in the Bible. And so potentially boring that if you count them long enough, they will put you right to sleep.

In today's readings, they are also stand-ins for all of us, we Christ-followers. And I have a confession: the fact that we are often compared to sheep in the bible has always made me a little bit squeamish.

Why?

Well, in the popular imagination, sheep are typically portrayed as so white they might have just stepped out of a clorax bath. Spotless and docile, pure enough to be slung across the shoulder of Jesus in art, or nestled at his feet. They are Innocence. Purity. And all too often in the West, blind obedience.

Even during Sunday school, I recall puzzling over what to do with them as we colored drawings of Jesus. Sheep were a blank spot on the page, barely even worthy of the dreaded and barely used white crayon. Really not worth coloring in at all.

Truth be told, I had much more of an affinity for goats. Tin-can chewing dynamos who climbed over everything, including one another. In the pasture, they seemed to gambol and frolic everywhere they went.

It was a shock to come to find out later that, in the Bible, that God would separate the sheep and the goats. And the goats weren't going anywhere that I wanted to... So that meant I needed to be innocent and pure? Ohhhhh boy. With all these flaws....

Fast forward to a month ago when the opportunity arose for Karen and me to give the message. And a whole lot of sheep were handed to me in the form of today's readings. With a whole lot of questions.

Fortunately, I happen to work with a shepherd. Or, rather, the daughter of a shepherd. I'm not quite sure if the title qualifies these days, given that sheep are penned in pastures instead of herded over hill and dale, but since this friend of mine, Alyse, had grown up with sheep, I did some grilling, to find out what they are all about, in the hope to find out who we are meant to be. And who Jesus is in turn. And what this whole following business is about.

**First: Shockingly, sheep are intelligent and discerning!** I had always thought of them as meek and mild and, to be honest, kind of stupid, chewing their cud with their eyes staring unfocused into the distance. But in fact, I was relieved to find out they watch and only decide to trust after finding out who a person has revealed themselves to be, trusting the shepherd above everyone. They know the faces of all of their flock mates—over 200 faces according to science—as well as their people.

**They are filthy!** In contrast to popular images of those bleached out sheep, sheep are very much “of the countryside.” Dirty. Smelly. Tacky with lanolin. And yet, despite it all, the shepherd hangs out with them. Sleeps with them. Eats with them. Defends them from wolves! Loves them. Gets down in the dirt with them.

**They know, trust, and love their shepherd!** And this is the most important thing—at least for the purposes of today—the sheep not only know their shepherd but they trust them and basically avoid anyone who is not them. They trust the shepherd and they follow the shepherd wherever

they go. The shepherd is not in some way far off palace, but beside them. A veritable, “Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I will stay” role model worthy of Ruth.

All in all, my sheep investigation pointed me deeper into the metaphor of we are as sheep and who Jesus is as shepherd—and why and how we follow.

Much to my relief, following Jesus is less about blind obedience and more about love and trust. It isn’t about our being perfect from the beginning, but rather of Jesus gathering us to him—filthy, hard headed creatures that we are—even as we roam the wilderness of this life. It is an invitation, a calling, built out of a relationship of daily love and care.

“My sheep hear my voice, Jesus says, and I know them, and they follow me.” As the good shepherd, he knows who we are and he invites us to follow in his steps, to green pastures, to still, refreshing waters, to safety. He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

And to follow him is not just to rest in the peace of knowing we are held in his protection. He also invites us to emulate him, in loving one another. “A new command I give you,” he says, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This is not the God of the old Testament, remote as a pillar of cloud and fire. This is the God who dines with prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners, the God who proclaims that heaven belongs to the little children and the least of these. The God who patiently gives us a road map for just how to follow him in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is a map that leads us through the wildernesses we find ourselves in—personal troubles and times of grief, confusion and doubt, ill health and financial ruin—as well as through the

wilderness of our time, one in which the individual is king, if not the dollar, one that seeks to pull us away from our flocks, our shepherd, our love, our community, and our direction.

Jesus's words also provide us a guide that calls us to be generous with one another, to participate in God's plan by sharing the overflow of God's generosity with us. Follow me! He says to the disciples who put down their nets to give their time and themselves to helping the poor, the hungry, and the sick. Follow me! He says to Zacchaeus (or, rather, "come down from that tree!"), who gives over half of his riches to the poor. Follow Me! He says, inviting us into his plan so that we are the ones to roll the rock away from Lazarus's tomb, participating in his resurrection. In the same way, Jesus can use us to multiply the food given to him to create miracles, feeding crowds of hungry people. And it is through Christ's example that the disciples are moved to heal the sick, as they did today in our reading from Acts, despite the fury and questions of the rulers, the elders, and the scribes. And, how today, we are called to follow Jesus and his generosity, as he asks us to follow him, to give out of our love for him, from the overflow of his love and care for us.

"Little children," we are exhorted today in the Epistle, "let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." So let us reflect today on God's generosity with us: The sun shining in the sky, the air that we breathe and the food that we eat, this stunning, magnificent, miraculous world. The myriad ways that he sustains our souls, our spirits, and our bodies.

[Pause]

Now let us act, let us give of ourselves to our community, rolling up our sleeves to serve one another in the church and in our neighborhoods. Let us give of our gifts, the balm of healing words or cooked meals, the light of a compliment or a lending hand. And let us give too, even of

our pocketbooks, which Jesus asked us to do. Not to Amazon, whose cardboard boxes pile in my recycling bin, but to those who need it. Not to the call of the material world, but to our flock.

In close, a reminder: Today is another opportunity to give to the Summer Enrichment Program, which lifts up the least of these, the children of our flock, children that Jesus said belong to him, to learn the miracle of swimming, to float on their backs and bask in the summer sky, to learn songs surrounded by other kids, to fill their bellies with food we can provide for them. Give, he says, and it will be given to you. And as these children grow with the memory of long summer days cared for by their community through SEP, they too will give generously, of themselves to one another, to the flock, and to us. And we will be reminded again that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Two more things: One, a huge thanks to all who came to Friday's SEP dinner with a special thanks to Karen and Harriet, to Alex and Clay and Suzanne. To all those who helped out.

And last, some notes about donations:

- \$20 is the cost of 1 weekend food package for 1 child
- \$40 is the cost of swim lessons for 1 child
- \$120 cost of 1 week in SEP for a child
- \$600 scholarship for 1 child for the entire program
- \$1200 weekend food packages for all children
- \$2500 swim lessons for all children for the program

You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you.

John Bunyon.