

It's About Relationship, Not Sheep

Intro. Many of us only know about sheep from reading about them or watching movies. They are shown as either cute and cuddly or silly and stupid because they tend to get lost easily. And they can smell bad. In the Lord's time, sheep and goats were important because they provided clothing and food, like milk and cheese. Most people were familiar with them, so the Lord used the common experience as a way to teach about the kingdom of God.

Today, the common ways we learn about faith are shared, personal experiences of God, history, art, music and of course the internet.

I. The context for the gospel on this Good Shepherd Sunday is a challenge by Pharisees who demand the Lord tell them if he is the Christ, the Messiah. He had already told them, but because they did not

believe, he said, "...you do not belong to my sheep." [John 10:26] This was after a long teaching about him as the good shepherd who takes care of his sheep unlike others, meaning the Pharisees and scribes. The Old Testament is filled with images of the lamb as a symbol of the Messiah who saves and gives up his life for others. In refusing that image of the lamb, they refused to hear his voice and chose not to belong to his flock. They preferred a different image of the Messiah, an all-conquering, warrior king like David who would overthrow their oppressors and restore power to Israel. A lamb was not an exciting image to be compared to. The warrior was more...hmm, exciting.

At night sheep were brought into a central area for safekeeping and mixed together with other flocks. In the morning, each shepherd would whistle or make a

sound familiar to his or her sheep and they followed her or him out to the pasture. Our experience is similar with our animals. Owners believe their pets know their names. They certainly seem to know the sound of our voice or at least recognize the sound of the can opener and food rattling in their dish. A mother or father can tell the sound of their child's voice in a crowd of others' and knows if it is joyful or frightened. Would then, God *not* know sound of our voice when we call on him?

Concl. We are not sheep, but the image of the Lord as the Good Shepherd is really about a relationship between God and us. A relationship exists between two *when there is trust*. Like our other relationships it is built over time, with regular, honest communication. We don't just talk and walk; we also listen and are comfortable in silence together.

That is how we hear and learn to recognize God's voice. Pope Francis famously said shepherds should smell like the sheep. At first, it is not an attractive thought. He meant if priests are not spending time among the people of God, how can they pastor. He also meant they better get out Vatican offices and into a parish. That wasn't very popular among some. **Through Baptism are all called to "pastor," to care for God's people. If more people believed that, there might not be shortages of ministers in our churches. I'm not speaking of more *ordained* men or *consecrated* women; I mean more *people* leading and guiding the church. It's your call.**

Fr. Michael Pendergraft
Fourth Sunday, Easter, 2022