

John 10:11-18

Most of us do not respond well to ridicule. When the name-calling begins, we right away assume a defensive posture. We may even go on the attack and fight back with a few choice words of our own. What do we do, however, when it's God doing the name-calling? Every year on Good Shepherd Sunday--the Fourth Sunday of Easter--God throws some ridicule our way by calling us sheep. Now maybe the hair on the back of your neck doesn't exactly bristle. We've probably been called worse things than that. But still, to be called a sheep is an insult.

Sheep rank right up there in intelligence beneath that of a pig; more along the line of cattle. Sheep are defenseless. When a coyote, a wolf, a wild dog, or a bear attacks, the only thing a sheep can do is run. And judging by the fact that a quarter million sheep are killed by predators in the U.S. each year, the predators run faster than the sheep. The only defense a sheep has, after running, is to join other sheep in a flock, and then all the sheep turn and look at the predator. That's really going to scare away a big, bad wolf--all the sheep looking at him.

A sheep on its back cannot get up. If someone doesn't help it to its feet, the sheep will eventually die. This is true. Don't try it at home or you may kill the sheep.

It's perfectly fine for little children of God to be called sheep. They are His little lambs and they are okay with that. But how does a grown adult, who owns several firearms, holds down a steady job and is basically a pretty responsible, independent person feel about singing the hymn, "*I Am Jesus' Little Lamb?*" Perhaps many of us feel that we have outgrown, not just the hymn, but also the whole idea that we are actually sheep. But here is something to consider. If you are not a sheep, then Jesus is not your Shepherd. Anyone who thinks they have outgrown the notion that they are a sheep has also outgrown the need for a Savior.

Perhaps God is being merciful to us, therefore, when He allows us to become sick. Not just sick with a head-cold, I mean really sick to the point where it drives us to our bed and we lie there flat on our back helpless, in misery. Sheep, remember, cannot get up when lying on their back. And so maybe God is reminding us every now and then that we really are sheep by laying us out flat. And not one of us could get up on our own. It's God who puts us on our feet again. Through doctors, medicine, through the body's defenses God is lifting us off our back because as sheep we can't do it by ourself.

And then also a sheep will be reminded very quickly that it is a sheep when a wolf or a bear is after it. If you don't want to admit you're a sheep, see how well you do against the devil without the Good Shepherd fighting him off for you.

We are sheep because Jesus says we are. And He says of Himself, "*I am the Good Shepherd.*" Now our text in John 10 is eight verses long, and in these eight verses, three times Jesus uses the phrase, "*the Good Shepherd.*" "*I am the Good Shepherd...the Good Shepherd...I am the Good Shepherd.*" It's as if He is wanting to drive this point home with us. And perhaps He does this because you and I have the tendency to turn Jesus' words around, at least in our minds. You and I say to ourselves over and over, day-in and day-out, "*I am the good sheep...the good sheep...I am the good sheep.*" We convince ourselves that it's others in our family, in our marriage, in our congregation, in our community who are the bad sheep, the black sheep. But that's not us. We're the good sheep. We all say it, "*I am the good sheep.*"

And since we're good sheep, we do not require a whole lot of forgiveness. We don't need the Lord's Supper that much. Every now and then will do. We don't need to go to church all that much. The church, the worship service is more for bad sheep. We're good sheep. We don't go for forgiveness. We go to church now and then because that's what good sheep do.

But to paraphrase the Apostle John, "*If we say that we are good sheep, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*" The truth is that we are wandering sheep. We wander away from our Shepherd and eventually, like the Prodigal Son, end up flat on our back. We're restless sheep. We do not like to sit still when our Shepherd speaks to us. We'd rather be off doing something we like doing. We're rebellious sheep, selfish sheep, immoral sheep, sheep who are disrespectful to authority, and on and on and on. We are everything except good sheep.

Today is not Good Sheep Sunday. It's Good Shepherd Sunday. And in a very real sense, every Sunday is Good Shepherd Sunday because our Shepherd is here in the sheepfold, here in the pastures, here in the living waters, not just once a year, but whenever His Word and Sacraments are given. He is here for you, and that's what makes Him not just a shepherd, but the Good Shepherd.

"*The Good Shepherd,*" He says, "*Lays down His life for the sheep.*" In these eight verses of our text, three times Jesus says of Himself that He is the Good Shepherd, but five times He speaks about laying down His life. Five times in eight verses. "*I lay down My life*" He says. For who? For His sheep. Not for good sheep. For bad sheep. For wandering sheep, selfish sheep, disrespectful, immoral, restless sheep. Friend, five times in these eight verses Jesus says it. He wants you to know, more than anything else, He wants you to know that He lays down His life for you.

Were you an immoral sheep last week? Were you selfish? Disrespectful to authority? Were you a lazy sheep? Were you everything but what God wants you to be? Do not fear. Your Good Shepherd laid down His life for you. At a place called Calvary He took all your sins and He died there for you, and now He lives. And so today, right now, you who are baptized into Christ; you who are here in His sheep pen because you need to be here; you are, more than anything else, a forgiven sheep. You are forgiven because Jesus says you are. In His eyes you are not a bad sheep. In His eyes you are not the black sheep of the family. In His eyes you are spotless, clean of every stain, holy in every way. Why? Because He became the bad sheep in your place on a cross, and you now are His holy sheep, forgiven, completely forgiven.

Because this is who you are, how can we go out into the world and purposely act like bad sheep? How can we who are forgiven by our Good Shepherd, reject His forgiveness by intentionally living in sinful and selfish ways? Today God lifts you up off of your back. He pulls you out of your sins. He delivers you from the angry wolf known as Satan. And He puts you on your feet so that you can follow Him, so that you can keep hearing His voice. He does this for you because you are His sheep and He is your Good Shepherd. Amen.