

II EASTER 2018

SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

FATHER CRAIG LOONEY

1 PETER 2.19-25 St. JOHN 10.11-16



Sheep must be God's favorite animals...they are mentioned more than 500 times in the Bible...more than any other animal.

Author, retired church pastor and marriage counselor, Gary Richmond, has been the subject of previous sermons. He has something to say about sheep...they may be God's favorite animals...but he admits they are not his. His opinion about sheep may be colored by the seven years he spent as animal keeper and veterinary assistant at the Los Angeles Zoo.

His book All God's Creatures: Spiritual Lessons from the Animals of the Bible has been called "a delightful, inspirational safari through Scripture". He explains among zookeepers...taking care of sheep was considered remedial work...a sort of punishment. Lions and tigers and bears were much more challenging.

About sheep, Mr. Richmond writes,

"The only value I ever noticed around the sheep was their willingness to subject themselves daily to eight hours of attention from unsupervised children. A part of me found it admirable that, despite the things that their little visitors did, the sheep never made an effort to retaliate."

What else does he have to say about sheep?

"Sheep have an unlimited capacity for getting into trouble. They need 24-hour care. Sheep are compelled by mob instinct...they don't think for themselves. Sheep are cowards...they don't help each other. Sheep lack intelligence...their vocabulary consists of one word..."baa." Sheep are very destructive to pastures...they pull grass up by the roots. Sheep are stubborn and selfish...they push each other out of the way to get to food. Sheep are forever getting lost...away from the safety of the flock and the shepherd...they are in constant danger. Sheep are vulnerable to predators...they panic and won't defend themselves. Sheep get very dirty...in their natural state their wool gets saturated with lanolin...they are walking Velcro strips attracting all kinds of dirt. Sheep do have at least one redeeming quality...they know their shepherd's voice and will come to him when he calls them."

All of these sheep characteristics could be applied to people...and they are the reason they need a shepherd to watch over them and take care of them...and the reason they are God's favorite animals. There is no better metaphor in Scripture...as Mr. Richmond rightly points out...for our relationship to God. We ARE his sheep.

Isaiah wrote that all of us are like sheep that are lost, each going his own way, and getting into trouble. Jeremiah wrote that we are like sheep that have gotten lost and can't find our way home. God spoke to Ezekiel and told him he himself would go out looking for his sheep to take care of them and bring them together again. God would not let his sheep stay lost; he would make sure they were home safe. God has been providing shepherds all along to take care of his people...we just need to stop running and listen to the Shepherd's call...and come home.

For people who heard what Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel were saying...this was radical and unexpected news. They understood God forgave sins and would welcome them home. They didn't understand God was actively seeking those who had wandered off and gotten lost so he could bring them home...they didn't have to figure it out on their own...and neither do we.

We call today "Good Shepherd Sunday" because of the shepherd images in both the Epistle and Gospel readings. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who is always looking after his sheep...keeping us safe and out of harms way. Jesus is the Shepherd of David's Psalm 23...always giving us strength, and we shall want for nothing.

Of course, people aren't sheep...but we too have the capacity to get ourselves into trouble. God gave us free will and we use it to make choices...some good...some bad. We can choose to do the right thing...or the wrong thing. We can do those things that are pleasing to God...or run off on our own and get lost. The better choice is to ask God for help in finding our way back home.

People also don't operate by pure instinct. Sheep only know they feel safe when they are being protected by the person who cares for them, where wild wolves can't reach them and hurt them. We have the God-given intelligence to see there is a way out of our sins and troubles and he gives us the help we need to do something about it. We can turn around and come back to Jesus the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is more than just a shepherd. He is THE Good Shepherd, who gave up his life for the sheep he loves. He is the Good Shepherd who comes looking for us when we get lost, when we wander off and get ourselves into trouble, when we sin and cut ourselves off from his love and from other people. Jesus never gives up on us. He is the One who calls us each by name to return to the safety of the flock.

We have a choice to make...we can stop running away and come home to Jesus. We were like sheep that had lost our way, but now we have been brought back to follow the Shepherd and Keeper of our souls.

