

Being a Sheep - Teresa Holden

Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

What is a sheep? Professor Warren Gill of the Animal Science Department at the University of Tennessee poses this question in his scholarly paper called “Applied Sheep Behavior.” There, Gill reports that sheep are “defenseless, wary, tight-flocking, visual, wool-covered and rudiment (cud-chewing).” Further, he says that they are “a strongly social animal requiring the presence of at least four or five sheep which, when grazing, maintain a visual link with each other.” (So, it’s not enough for sheep to sense that their buddies are with them; they have to actually keep a small group in their field of vision.) In order to more fully describe sheep, Dr. Gill contrasts these herbivore animals with other animals that are carnivores. He says: “Sheep normally spend more time consuming and ruminating (or cud-chewing) and little time in searching for food. Sheep merely graze. Carnivores are anatomically suited for killing other animals while sheep are anatomically ideal for grazing.” Dr. Gill continues: “Carnivores kill sheep. Sheep never kill carnivores.”

These descriptions give us insight about what the Psalmist and Jesus and Peter all are trying to convey about our relationship with God and each other when they use the metaphor of sheep in today’s Scriptures. As sheep, we need each other; we are vulnerable, and we are fully dependent on our Master, the Lord Jesus. These are all descriptions of who we are in Christ.

Like sheep, we need each other because we too are vulnerable. Sheep literally need each other for survival. If one sheep is alone in a field, that sheep is obviously vulnerable to the attack of lurking carnivores. (Remember: “Carnivores kill sheep. Sheep never kill carnivores.”) Carnivores are less likely to attack a flock than they are an individual sheep. Sheep know this instinctively, which is why they become physically stressed when four or five other sheep are not within their visual range. They need their flock for emotional comfort and for literal protection.

We see this strong desire for affiliation demonstrated by the early Christians in Acts 2. Here we see the shared sense of purpose the early Christians had. THEY were the first church; there were no precedents set for how people functioned together as believers in Christ. No one told them that they had to get together and listen to the apostles. Nor did anyone say that daily potluck or a community sharing of possessions was what it meant to be Christian. In Acts we see that Christians engaged with each other in these ways because of the internal sense of joy and satisfaction they received from these actions. They felt awe because of the visible works of grace that God was doing among them (miracles and signs of God’s power and presence); they felt glad and generous, and they had a common sense of goodwill toward one another. These early Christians participated in a transformed way of living, one in which they didn’t focus on themselves, but rather on God’s revelation of Himself in their midst.

Still, John 10 suggests that Christians, like sheep, are also under threat without their flock. The personification of evil in this parable is a thief who comes to “steal, kill and destroy.” In this passage one of the important characteristics of being a sheep is being able to distinguish between the voice of strangers and the voice of the Master. Sometimes, for us, the factors that would “steal, kill and destroy” the gladness and joy that are inherent to our faith are actually people, but sometimes they are other factors, like the noise in our own heads, our own sense of self-defeat, things that prevent us from having faith, or hearing the voice of our Master, Jesus. How do we know the voice of our Master? A test for whether the voice we are hearing is that of Jesus or that of a thief is whether that voice leads us into a place that is beyond our reach without faith and our flock. In both Acts and John, the Master takes people into places they would never go on their own. Do people easily choose to sell their possessions and give the proceeds to their whole community? I don’t think so. But these Christians experienced such a strong sense of gladness, generosity and goodwill from these actions that they began to experience life, abundantly, as a sheep does when their master has taken them to the best grazing area.

The richness of the abundant life, however, doesn’t mean that we always remain in “green pastures.” The 23rd Psalm tells us there will be dark valleys and even enemies. Peter advises us that we will endure pain, pain from doing good, from representing what is right, from following our consciences to pursue justice in our world. Suffering is a part of the package, but Christ’s love abides with us through suffering and at the end of the suffering is righteousness and healing. First Peter 2 says, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps . . . He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”

I have a friend in East St. Louis whose name is Antonia Ingram. Ms. Ingram is one of the most blessed people I know, not because of any sort of material blessing that she has; in fact, she has spent most of her life in poverty. She is blessed because of the strength of her relationship with Jesus that has grown through suffering. The pain that has been a part of her life has transformed her into a beautiful vessel of God’s love. Ms. Ingram is a person I always want to give me a hug because she always prays for me when she hugs me. She lingers and talks to God during the embrace. At first, this used to make me feel uncomfortable, but as I have grown to understand that this is deep, spiritual intercession she is doing on my behalf, I have come to feel blessed and encouraged by her prayers for me. Her niece told me when her Aunt Toni would pick her up from school, the trip home would always take much longer than if anyone else picked her up because Ms. Ingram would pull the car to the side of the road every time she saw someone she knew; she would get out of the car and pray for that person, just like she prays for me. Ms. Ingram is a very intelligent woman, and I’ve had many conversations with her in which I found her discernment to be so valuable to me. She has caused me to consider the fact that there is a kind of blessing that can come from poverty because of the sharp sensitivity it has developed within her to other people’s needs. The love of Jesus just spills out of her, and I always feel refreshed after seeing her. I think that she clearly illustrates what Psalm 23:6 is talking about: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my

life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.” I believe that is where Ms. Ingram resides, because she exhibits complete dependence on God that is like a sheep to its master.

So we see that the very nature of being a sheep is descriptive of our relationship to God and each other. May we grow in grace, generosity and goodwill, so that we may hear and respond to the voice of our Master, Jesus Christ.