

Sheep

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Easter 4, April 16, 1989. Scripture Lessons: Acts 13:15-16, 26-33; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I don't know much about sheep. I've had only two experiences with sheep. When I was a little boy we used to go out to my cousins in Minnesota in the summer for vacation. They lived on a farm and had a flock of sheep. I always wanted to pet the sheep and put my arms around them. They looked so soft and cuddly. But I never could get close to them. They'd run away from me. They didn't know me. They didn't listen to me.

The second experience was when Kay and I went to Scotland the year after we were married. We rented a car and road through the rugged highlands. There were sheep all over the place. Sometimes we had to stop the car because these dumb sheep would stand in the middle of the road at watch us. Sometimes we'd come across the carcasses of sheep hit by cars. But I never saw a shepherd and I never saw one of those fabled Scottish sheep dogs.

Since I don't know much about sheep I did a little research this past week. I talked to an Amishman, Ben Beiler, out on Noble Road. I said to him, "Ben, I'm writing a sermon on sheep but I don't know anything about them. What can you tell me about sheep?" "Well", he said, "Sheep give in." "What do you mean, *they give in*?" "Well", he said, "I've seen a dog attack a sheep. If a dog catches one, the sheep just gives in and lets the dog tear it to pieces." "What else do you know about sheep, Ben?" "Well, they're not like a dog. They're not like a horse. They're more like a turkey. They're really dumb." Then he said, "If you're going to have sheep, you'd better have a really good shepherd."

Another thing I learned about sheep this past week. I read that we don't

have many sheep shearers in the U.S. and sometimes they're careless. In removing the wool from a sheep, they may cut off an ear, cut the tendon in a leg and, believe it or not, the sheep usually won't make a sound, even though it has been seriously injured. That gave me new insight into what the Bible says about how, like sheep before shearers, we are dumb.

Well, the more I learned about sheep the more disturbed I was that Jesus calls his followers sheep. It's not very complimentary. Sheep are dumb. They're defenseless. They're always wandering off. But if I'm a Christian I have to admit that I'm a sheep. I said to my Amish friend, "Ben, Jesus says he's the Good Shepherd and we're his sheep. If what you say about sheep is true I don't think I like being called a sheep." "Ah, yes!" Ben said. "But think of the shepherd. We're defenseless like sheep without Jesus." And then I thought, "I wonder how these non-violent Amish have survived for 500 years, these strange people who, like sheep, don't fight back when someone attacks them. They must have a really good shepherd to watch over them and to defend them."

If we knew what sheep are like, I don't think many people would want to admit that they're sheep. But, when you stop to think about it, all of us are sheep, really, whether or not we follow Christ. I'm thinking of something else I read this week about sheep. I read that you can hold out a 10 foot pole. And if you can get the lead sheep to jump over it, the next one will follow and on down the line until all the sheep in the flock are jumping over this stick. And then, I read that if you remove the pole altogether the sheep will continue to jump over the pole that isn't even there. And I thought, "That's what we all do when we follow the crowd." One of your friend starts swearing. Another follows suit. And then you feel like you have to swear. One of your friends gets drunk. Another joins

in and then you feel like you've got to join in. A friend tells an ethnic joke putting down a race or nationality, another follows, and soon you find yourself joining in. Eventually you don't even need someone to prime the pump. You just do it on your own.

We're so easily led astray... so easily fleeced. We're so vulnerable... so quick to follow the crowd. We cave in under peer pressure. And like sheep injured by a shearer, we may be seriously injured. Someone has fleeced us... maybe someone we loved... and were in deep pain and we remain dumb... nobody knows about it. How many knew how deep the pain of Tom Susuki was before he took his life? How many of us know when our kids are really hurting and what's hurting them. We're so much like sheep. The important thing, then, is who our shepherd is... who we listen to... who we follow and who defends us.

"My sheep listen to my voice... and they follow me," Jesus says. From what I've read everybody in the days of Jesus knew about sheep in Palestine. Sheep and shepherds must have been a very common, everyday sight. Everybody knew that sheep were usually put in an enclosure at night along with the sheep of other owners. And if you had 200 sheep in a sheepfold- which was a high fence or some type of high enclosure with walls. If the shepherd came to the door of that sheepfold and called for his sheep-- he might own only 10, but each of the 10 would instantly know his voice... and answer no other voice. It reminds me of the goat lady who died last year... Geraldine Givens. I had the privilege of getting to know her in the last year of her life as a hospice volunteer. Geraldine raised goats. She'd take these goats for walks through Nottingham park. Each of her goats had a name and they'd come when she called them. That's personal. Out of all the people in the world, sheep can hear and recognise

the voice of their owner. And if you belong to Jesus, the Lord says, you'll hear his voice and follow him.

We hear so many voices today... Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Morton Downey, Joe Isuzu, President Bush, Gorbachev. All of us recognise the voice of our heroes. If you're a Phillies fan you recognise the voice of Mike Schmidt. If you love rock music you can recognise the sound of your favorite group. I love the songs of Bob Dylan. I've listened to him for close to 30 years now. My mother couldn't stand him. When my mother heard his voice she'd turn the radio off. But when I heard his voice (which is so terrible that it's good) I stopped, turn up the radio, and listened. We hear and recognise the voices of our heroes. And if we belong to Jesus we'll hear and recognise his voice.

I know... sometimes its hard to hear his voice among all the other voices. But Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice... and they follow me." If you belong to Jesus Christ and you hear competing voices, something inside of you will tell you: "That's not true... That's not what Jesus says... That's not how Jesus talks... That's not what Jesus would do... That's not how Jesus leads. That's not how Jesus treats people. That's not what Jesus says about money or power or sex."

Jesus says that you and I are sheep. He says that everyone who follows him is a sheep... defenseless, without him... easily injured... sometimes injured without even knowing it... in need of so much care by him... prone to wander... not too smart even when we're a high school or college graduate... we all do some pretty stupid things... just like sheep. When I follow the crowd I'm a sheep and when I follow Jesus I'm a sheep.

And then Jesus says, not only that his sheep know his voice but that he knows them. What's it like to be known? Garrison Keillor tells us about

Father Emil, the pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Roman Catholic Church, in Lake Wobegone. He goes for a walk every Saturday evening after sunset... he walks by the homes of his parishioners.... he walks by the homes of those who don't go to church. And as he passes he prays for the people in that house... for the father out of work... for the widow... for the couple going through marital problems. He prays for the teenager who wants to go to a rock concert in Minneapolis but isn't allowed because, mom says, "You'll get in the wrong crowd down there in the city." He prays for the little girl whose pet kitten got accidentally run over in the street. He prays for them because he knows them.

Inside the homes, however, nobody notices Father Emil walking by. They're watching their heroes on t.v. or listening to them on the radio. Up in the bedrooms of the young people are large posters of their heros. But their heros don't know them. Their heroes don't even know they exist. Well, not even Father Emil knows his flock the way Christ knows his sheep. "I know you," he says. "I know all about you. I know, not only the joys and concerns that everybody knows. I know your secret joys and fears and anxieties. And I give you eternal life and you shall never die. No one can snatch you away from me. I'll never forsake you. I'll never desert you because I'm the good shepherd and I lay down my life for you. I've come not to destroy life... not to take joy out of your life... not to say NO to all you enjoy and love but to give you eternal life, and you shall never die."

That's why I'd so much rather be owned by Jesus-- be one of his sheep... than belong to anyone else.

Let us pray: