

“Shepherd of Stone”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
April 21, 2024 - Fourth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 4:5-12; John 10:11-18](#)

Sheep are fluffy and fun. Sheep have wonderfully interesting eyes, with rectangular pupils that allow them to see almost everything around them without having to turn their heads. Sheep are intelligent, each being able to recognize and remember as many as 50 other sheep's faces and human faces as well. Sheep experience a variety of emotions and make different, amusing vocalizations to express them.

These are just some of the reasons why sheep are wonderful creatures, but it is for none of these good reasons that the people of God, throughout our scriptures, are likened to sheep, as we are in today's gospel lesson from John. So why, then, is it that we are often compared to sheep?

One reason is that sheep are social animals that flock together, gathering and grazing in groups rather than hanging out on their own. In the same way that sheep belong to one another in their groups, the people of God are also called to gather and to experience life together in supportive communities. This is one of the reasons why we make it a priority to meet together, as we are right now, rather than using this time to do any number of other good things that could enrich our lives. As a flock of God's sheep, we gather, even when it is inconvenient, even when it requires personal sacrifices, even if we had to sacrifice our own safety. Gathering together as a community of faith is essential to who we are.

Another reason that we are compared to sheep is that both we and our fluffy, bleating friends follow the leaders who guide us. We follow God, who leads us through the shadowy valleys towards green pastures and still waters. And we follow the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who shows us how find those green pastures and still waters by giving of ourselves for the good of the flock. Jesus showed us through his own sacrifice what love that leads to peace looks like, and we are called to always follow this good and most blessed way of selfless living.

We are also like sheep in that we are to be like them in our gentleness. Sheep are not predators, and other than clumping together with their fluffy coats to protect them, they are defenseless against carnivorous beasts, such as wolves, that do prey upon them. One of the difficult parts of the job of shepherd is the task of keeping the sheep safe from such beasts that would cause them harm, which is why Moses, who was a shepherd before he was a deliverer, carried a wooden staff, and David, who was a shepherd before he was a king, used a stone-flinging sling. Shepherds defend their gentle sheep, and God defends us, keeping our spirits safe in spite of all harm we might face, and the way of Christ the Good Shepherd, the way of love, preserves us no matter the dangers that may befall us.

So often, though, we flocks of God have abandoned the gentle and shepherd-reliant ways of the sheep and have become predators ourselves. Rather than following in the peaceful, sacrificial way of the Good Shepherd, we have so often chosen the violent path of gaining and growing power over others that we may coerce them into living as we desire. And so often we wander away not only from the peaceful path of Christ but the other sheep who travel upon it together.

Today, however, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us reclaim our identity as a gathering community of peace-making Christ-followers. Let us be resolute in this, continuing on this path together with stony determination. Let us grow our community of faith as a household of love, a holy temple in which our gracious God is glorified by our own loving acts of grace offered to one another.

For today, as we remember our calling to remain gathered in love as a flock of God's sheep, we are also reminded of another image that can help us better understand our identity that we could better live into it, that we are being built up as a living temple, with Jesus Christ serving as our cornerstone; we are reminded that while we are indeed like soft, fluffy sheep, we are also like hard blocks of stone that are being used to build up a solid house of worship. So let us rise upon the firm foundation of Christ and his way of love, co-creating with God a lovely structure that inspires people to come in and join us in worship and service to the world.

Here, may we learn to not reject other stones, as Jesus was rejected, because we think they might not be quite the right shape or shade or that they've become a little too distressed after tumbling down life's hillsides. Rather, let us find ways to

include all kinds of people, and especially those who may not receive a warm welcome outside of our walls.

Here, may we welcome all kinds of sheep to graze with us as part of our flock, and may we welcome all kinds of stones to build up with us this house of faith as we continue in our 296th year as a church. As we do so, may the Good Shepherd lead us into new, grassy pastures, where we might enjoy more health, well-being, and peace. Amen.