

Numbers. Our lives are filled with numbers. Each year we file our income taxes. Now that's an exercise in numbers to end all numbers games: earned numbers, spent numbers, invested numbers, and saved numbers. When it is finally prepared, we send it off to the Internal Revenue Service with our Social Security number on it. And the IRS takes all those numbers and puts them into a computer, along with the numbers of thousands and thousands of other people. And to them, we become a number. The government knows us by our tax number. The state knows us by our driver's license number. The bank knows us by our account number. And when we retire, we'll be remembered by our Social Security number. And it goes on and on. In fact, you might wonder if anybody knows us at all without a number!

And that's why this morning's Gospel reading is so significant, because it tells us that God knows us. He knows us intimately, in fact, better than we know ourselves. That special relationship is compared to a shepherd and his sheep. Why sheep?

Now if I had to nominate one animal to represent the word mediocre, a sheep would easily be in the top five. Sheep are not independent. They cannot defend themselves like cattle. They are not strong, creative or brave. They cannot even work up a good stampede. The story is told of a farmer who had just rescued a lost sheep. When asked how the sheep got lost, the farmer replied, "They just nibble themselves lost. They go from one tuft of grass to another, until at last they've lost their way." Is that why we are like sheep?

We nibble away at life with little purpose or direction, until it's gone and we have no idea where it went.

No, there has to be more to why Jesus choose to use a sheep to represent his disciples? Even in ancient society, sheep and shepherds did not garner the respect and admiration of the rich and famous. Sheep, however, have one particularly admirable quality. They will follow their shepherd wherever he leads them. They have learned to know him and trust him. Move three flocks into a field, place three shepherds at three strategic points and have each of them issue a call. The sheep will sort themselves. So on the plus side sheep know how to follow, most of the time.

A visitor to sheep country wanted to try an experiment. He borrowed the shepherd's hat and jacket, practiced the call that the shepherd used and then moved to the side of the field to see if he could get the sheep to follow him. Not one of them moved toward him. "Will the sheep ever follow someone other than you?" The traveler asked. "Oh yes," the shepherd replied, "sometimes a sheep gets sick, and then it will follow anyone."

Sadly that also may be why we are like sheep or at least sick sheep. The people of God have been placed in a very large field that is called the world. Many voices are calling us to come and join them. The voice of materialism wants us to deny our faith in the supernatural and believe only in the physical world. The voice of consumerism calls us to fulfill our envy by overspending on vacations, cars, clothing and a home. The voice of entertainment wants to fill our lives with media driven flashes that grab our attention,

isolate us from our family and friends and then leave us with nothing but an oversized bill. Battered by the storms of life and distracted by voices urging us to go this way and that we get confused, frightened; it leads to despair, to hopelessness, to a “sickness” of sorts in our spirit. And when someone is “sick” they will follow anyone who will promise a moment of happiness, a brief feeling of peace or forgetfulness, a sense that they are someone.

When Jesus was criticized for hob-nobbing with the “wrong kinds” of people, he replied to His critics: *“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”* Years ago, someone suggested that this was really the only “new thing” that Jesus taught, the only thing that had not already been said by the rabbis before Him. But it is the most important thing, isn’t it? In Jesus we see a God who does not simply write off His losses, but goes out to seek and to save the least, the last, the sick and the lost. In fact, according to Jesus, God will use every trick in the book to win us over short of beating us over the head and dragging us kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of Heaven.

A mother of eight children was once asked if she had any favorites. “Favorites?” she replied. “Yes, I have favorites. I love the one who is sick until he is well again. I love the one who is in trouble until he is safe again. And I love the one who is farthest away until he comes home.” Jesus said, “That is what God is like. God is the good shepherd whose love never stops, a Parent whose love will never give up.

You may stop loving God, but God will never stop loving you. You may run away from God, but you will soon find that your legs are too short. You can't get away from God. And that is not a threat, but a promise! God is out on every road where people, like sheep, get themselves lost, earnestly and tenderly seeking them and calling them back home.

The good shepherd doesn't demand of us that we first be good sheep and that can be comforting especially to those of us who are, pardon the bad pun, "hard-of-herding." He knows us and loves us even as we nibble our way into dangerous areas.

There is an old story of a census taker who was making his rounds in the lower East side of New York, who interviewed an Irish woman bending over her washtub. "Lady, I am taking the census. What's your name? How many children have you?" She replied, "Well, let me see. My name is Mary. And then there's Marcia, and Duggie, and Amy, and Patrick, and..." "Never mind the names," he broke in, "just give me the numbers." She straightened up, hands on hips, and with a twinkle in her eye, said, "I'll have ye know, sir, we ain't got into numberin' them yet. We ain't run out of names!" The image of God as the Good Shepherd tells us that is the way it is with God. He knows us by name.