

I like dogs. I really do. Don't let the fact that I recoil from them every time I see one fool you. If allergies weren't a factor, I might have a dog right now. And surprisingly enough, those allergies didn't always exist. I remember playing with dogs when I was little without a single problem. Then, sometime during my teen years, all of a sudden, my eyes, nose, and throat started swelling shut every time I touched one.

Our neighbors actually had a dog that I played with all the time as a child. Her name was Jessie. A Chocolate Lab that they got as a puppy. And I can say from experience that if you want a pet that will tire out your children, get a Chocolate Lab puppy. They have infinite amounts of energy. I would play with her for hours. And it was always me who ran out of steam before her.

And, of course, there were plenty of tricks that they taught her and instructions for her to obey. But there were plenty of things that she didn't need to be taught, too. You don't need to teach a Lab how to fetch, for example. Or even to fetch by scent. Our neighbors would purchase plastic Frisbees embedded with scents that only dogs could smell. And of course, she would sprint across the yard and chase them down every time.

But every once in a while, we would throw her off. We'd pretend to throw the Frisbee, but hold onto it for a second, and actually then throw it in the opposite direction, often under a bush or shrub. Jessie would immediately sprint in the direction we had pretended to throw it, then eventually stop, look to see if we still had it, and then go into "search mode," sticking her nose to the ground, winding up and down the yard, until she caught the scent and found it.

Chocolate Labs are naturally retrievers. They have an innate sense for tracking objects down. But not just any objects. Most of the time, they track down the object you want them to track down. Because they have a natural sense of obedience as well. They just seem to understand the master-pet relationship from birth. That there's an order to things. You give instructions. They listen and obey. It's just the way it works.

And that's fundamentally what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson today. He uses the analogy of sheep instead of dogs, but it's the same concept. *"My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me."* That's the way it's supposed to work. As sheep follow shepherds and dogs follow masters, so we follow our Lord.

It's supposed to be innate in us. We're just born with it. We just do it, instinctively. We recognize the shepherd's voice. We obey the master's instructions. We're immensely happy and energetic while we do it. And everything just works.

Except that it doesn't always just work. It doesn't even always work in the animal world, let alone the human world. Labs are supposed to be among the friendliest, most trustworthy dogs in the world. And yet, the world's first face transplant recipient was horribly disfigured by her beloved and fully trained Lab who attacked her in her sleep. What in the world makes a loving, friendly dog like that turn on its master so violently? I don't know, but it happens.

And frankly, we could ask the same question of ourselves. What makes human beings do the horrible things that we do? Because, quite frankly, I think in many ways the average Chocolate Lab is more obedient to its master than the average human being is to God. And this applies to Christians and non-Christians alike. Trained and untrained, if you will.

Because although the sins of the average Christian may be different than the sins of the average non-Christian, we're just as prone to commit them. Our lies may not be criminal, but they're no less sinful. Our hatred and bigotries may not be violent, but they're no less heartbreaking to our Lord. Our perversities may not be so public, but they're no less revolting in the eyes of God.

This is the reality of our sinful nature. Scripture does not describe us as mostly good creatures who need a little training. It says *"None is righteous, no, not one... no one seeks for God."* *"The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot,"* Paul tells us. Like wild animals, we resist the leash. Like straying sheep, we wander far from the Shepherd's voice.

Over the course of the Old Testament, God continually tries to train us. That's what the Law is, after all. It's God's attempt to housebreak humanity. Because, frankly, we were acting like animals.

God did not create us to turn on our parents. To savagely murder each other. To mate like rabbits without any thought of marriage. To have no regard for the possessions of others. To constantly fight over food and valuables and territory and spouses. The Ten Commandments are not that complicated. They're simply the ways that God wanted to distinguish humans from animals.

But even as basic as they are, we couldn't obey them. Humanity just doesn't take training. It's against our sinful nature. And so God stepped back. And He said, "Alright, if humans won't listen to their God, maybe they'll listen to another human." If dogs won't listen to their master, maybe they'll listen to another dog. If sheep won't listen to their shepherd, maybe they'll listen to a lamb.

The Lamb. The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The Lamb who did not merely come to teach or to train, but to take our place. The Lamb who came to do what we could not do: live without sin. And the Lamb who came to suffer the fate that should have been ours.

On the cross, Jesus bore the full wrath of God against our disobedience. *"God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* The Good Shepherd laid down His life for the sheep.

Jesus tells us, *"My sheep hear my voice."* And we still hear him today. But how do we hear that voice today? Not in dreams. Not in feelings. But through His Word. Through preaching. Through Baptism. Through the Lord's Supper. These are the means by which the Shepherd calls His sheep. *"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."*

In Holy Baptism, Christ calls each sheep by name and marks them as His own. In the Lord's Supper, He leads us into green pastures, feeding us with His own body and blood. Through these gifts, the Shepherd trains, forgives, strengthens, and keeps His flock.

And his call is not a message of wrath or retribution or demands. But a message of mercy and hope. *"I give them eternal life,"* Jesus says. *"They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand."* The same hands pierced for our transgressions now hold us with eternal strength. The Shepherd of the sheep became a Lamb. And by becoming a Lamb, the Lamb becomes the Shepherd.

That's the picture that Revelation gives us. The Lamb who was slain is now seated on the throne. And from His throne, He rules over all things for the sake of His sheep. The Son of God lowers Himself to become a man, and by doing so is exalted to the highest place of heaven. And now rules over all as God almighty.

But notice the people in that image. Humans acting like humans. Humans acting like God's vision of humanity. Humans who know how to worship their God. Humans who know how to trust their God for all things. Humans who obediently listen to their God and follow their God to springs of living water.

That is how God created humanity. That is what God had in mind for us. That is what God is bringing to us. A world without hunger or thirst. Pain or suffering. A world without weeping. Because there is no reason to weep when Christ is your Shepherd. When Christ is your Master. When Christ is your God.

The Shepherd is the Lamb. The Lamb is the Shepherd. By the Lamb's sacrifice, we are made whole. And by the Shepherd's words—spoken through His Word and Sacraments—we are comforted with the hope of eternal life. God has a plan for humanity, and it is not to wander like sheep or destroy ourselves like wild dogs. But to stand before His throne, where we are His people and He is our God and no one and nothing can separate us.

Take hope in the words of the Shepherd. Trust in the blood of the Lamb. And proclaim to the whole world that salvation belongs to our God. Amen.