

Message: The Good ... Doorway?

Did you have a pet growing up?

I did. It was a wonderful experience, for the most part. Pets give us comfort and enjoyment. There are good benefits to owning a pet. I invite to check out what Woman’s Day¹, WebMD² and the Center for Disease Control (CDC)³ all have to say. The health benefits of owning a pet include lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and less loneliness. Owning a pet creates opportunities for exercise, outdoor activities and social interaction. Having a pet in the house is something we do because it warms our heart.

Our pets love us and we feel great!

Owning a pet comes with responsibilities. The American Veterinary Medical Association⁴, PBS Kids⁵ and petMD⁶ give tips for being a responsible pet owner. I’ll note the first one: avoid impulsive decisions when selecting a pet! And there are the “not so fun” parts like cat boxes and cleaning up after dogs. As owners, we need to select a pet suited to our home and lifestyle. We’re making a commitment for the life of our pet. We need to provide appropriate food, water, shelter, health care, exercise, mental stimulation, plus training and social interaction.

The most important thing of all is to love our pet!

If you think this sounds hard, you probably aren’t a parent!

Why am I talking about pets? It’s good analogy to the illustration Jesus used in John 10:1-10. The big difference, of course, is that Jesus is talking to people who raised sheep for food and wool. It’s about farm animals. Most of us don’t raise sheep. And we don’t raise pets for food or wool. But the care and responsibility of tending to a pet is similar to that of a shepherd tending to sheep.

A shepherd’s primary responsibility is making sure the sheep are healthy. That means good pasture for grazing, calm water to drink,

¹ <http://www.womansday.com/life/pet-care/a2352/10-health-benefits-of-owning-a-pet-116238/>

² <http://www.webmd.com/hypertension-high-blood-pressure/features/health-benefits-of-pets#1>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/health-benefits/>

⁴ <https://www.avma.org/public/PetCare/Pages/responsible-pet-ownership.aspx>

⁵ <http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/family/pets/article3.html>

⁶ <http://www.petmd.com/dog/care/can-dogs-teach-kids-responsibility>

tending whenever they're ill or injured, searching if they get lost, and calming when they're anxious. You've probably heard this analogy.

One similarity pets and sheep share is this: they know and respond to their master's voice. That's one of the things to take away. Jesus used this sermon illustration – shepherd and sheep, after healing a man born blind. He'd been a beggar all his life. Even though the man could clearly now see, neither his neighbors, the lay leaders of the church or the clergy could understand what happened or who miraculously healed him. They refused to see. Even the man's parents distanced themselves, for fear of being shunned by their neighbors or kicked out of the church.

Those who refuse to see God's work in their presence, even when it's obvious to everyone else, are called out by Jesus. They're strangers, thieves and outlaws, trying to mislead those following Jesus, who believe he's the Messiah. Sheep may not be smart, but they'll recognize the voice of their master. We may not always be smart, but if we trust God and listen carefully, we'll hear the voice of Jesus calling us to be part of his flock.

Does that make sense? Maybe. Let's see. If I paraphrased what John said using the modern day version of the analogy, it would go something like this: *“I assure you that anyone who doesn't enter into the house using the door comes in by stealth or violence. The one who enters using the door is the pet's owner. The pet listens to their owner's voice. The owner calls the pet by name and leads it out. The owner goes first and the pet follows, because the pet knows the owner's voice. They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice”* (John 10:1-6). People are confused by the illustration when Jesus used it. It makes sense, but it's hard to connect to.

What's the problem? There are several reasons. We're the pet (or sheep) in the illustration. That doesn't make us feel very good. The Lord isn't trying to make fun of us, but we really don't like being called dumb, unclean and defenseless animals, do we? The truth may strike a little too close to home for us to be comfortable with it. The part about us hearing and responding to Jesus' voice does make sense, if we think about what prompted us to seek a deeper spiritual life. If our heart was empty and we're moved by Jesus' message, we're hearing God's voice.

The people don't get it, though. That's why Jesus shifts to a different perspective. Rather than talking about sheep, Jesus talks about himself. Jesus says, *“I am the doorway”* (vv7,9).

What's the doorway? It's not a physical thing or place. Here's a clue. In Hebrews 10:19-21, the author says, *“... we have confidence that we can enter [heaven] by means of Jesus' blood, through a new and living way that he opened up for us God's house has a landlord.”* Through his death on a cross and resurrection, Jesus opened a doorway to heaven - a stairway to heaven, that wasn't open to us before. Creating that doorway to salvation was God's plan all along. Jesus knew we'd be lost without hope of reaching heaven unless there's a new way, so that's why he willingly gave up his life for all of us – you, me and all people.

Even better, Jesus invites us to go to God through the doorway without fear or worry. He guards the way. No one can steal us away from Jesus with lies or by fooling us. No one can take us away from Jesus with any form of violence. We can't barricade or lock it. Jesus holds the keys. No matter what our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, government authorities or church members say or do to discourage or hurt us, the doorway to heaven stays open. Jesus loves us. All we have to do is accept and return the love of our resurrected Savior to walk through the door. The author of Hebrews continues *“Therefore, let's draw near with a genuine heart with the certainty that our faith gives us, Let's hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, because the one who made the promises is reliable.”* (vv22-23). We can trust God.

Jesus gave his life for us. That shows the depth of his love. Jesus said, *“I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you”* (John 15:15b). We aren't pets. We aren't farm animals. We're part of Jesus' family. We do have needs. Life gets messy. But God doesn't mind. God loves us. If our spirit turns to the Spirit when we're spiritually hungry and thirsty, when we need tending, when we're injured or ill, when we're lost and alone or when we're anxious, God is ready, willing and able to help us. We're part of the family. Even death can't break the bond.

Jesus came to give us life. He wants us to live life fully, wholly and without reservation. All we have to do walk through the door and follow his voice, wherever he leads. Following Jesus leads to life and gives glory to God. Going any other way gives glory to ourselves.

Which doorway will you choose?

I pray ...

Great God, our Creator, we are helpless without you. We can't protect ourselves from danger, nor can we will our hearts to sing. You gave us Jesus, who has built us up and surrounded us with his grace. When we think of our lives before Jesus entered in, we must confess that we were cold as ice. Now, we dwell in the sunshine of your love under the a sky of faith. We've come to enjoy each other and communion with Your Holy Spirit. Let your goodness and mercy follow us all the days of our lives, and may we dwell in your house forever! Amen.⁷

John 10:1-10 (NRSV)

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

⁷ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/additional-21st-century-africana-worship-resources-for-april-17-2005-fourth>