

I know very little about sheep. I've seen them at the State Fair, but that's about it.

But from what I've read about them, I've learned that they can sometimes be quite stubborn. And sometimes not all that bright. And from what I've read about shepherding, it's by no means an easy job. The shepherd would have to watch the sheep carefully all day to make sure they didn't wander off. But, over time, the sheep would come to trust the shepherd so that in the morning, when he called for them from the pen where they were often kept with other sheep overnight, they would recognize his voice and follow him.

If you think about it, we can share a lot in common with sheep, can't we? We can be stubborn. We can get angry. But through it all, the love of our God is always there. And when we allow ourselves to be served, to let love envelop us, it can bring about a remarkable transformation.

In many aspects, our mothers whom we also honor today on Mother's Day, illustrate this reality through the testament of their lives.

Sharing a story about her mom, Shawelle Eliason writes of a time she experienced this when in many aspects she was lost as a sheep at the tough age of 12 when she was half girl, half woman depending on the day or the hour.

In her words:

When I look back, I understand that I'd been awful to my mother all afternoon.

Somewhere in the years that followed, I learned a term for what had happened that day. Misplaced anger. I'd taken all the hurt and frustration from my junior high day and hurled them at my mom.

It had been, by 12-year-old girl standards, a brutal day. My best friend Mary ditched me at lunchtime to hang with a cool girl. In P.E. class, we were lined up and forced to square dance with a member of the opposite sex. My assigned partner balked at my nervous, wet palms and, for the rest of the morning, called me "Trout." We'd had a history test in homeroom, and

though I'd studied, my memory bank was plum empty for facts on the French and Indian War.

And I had to ride the bus home.

Perfectly terrible. Every ounce of it.

"Hey, how was your day?" chirped Mom as I walked through the front door and dropped my backpack. She smiled and went back to tying my little sister's shoe.

"There are cookies on the counter."

I sulked my way to the kitchen to find peanut butter cookies. The kind that were crisscrossed with the tines of a fork.

"Geesh, Mom," I'd said. "Couldn't you have made chocolate chip?"

Later in the evening, when Mom pulled baked chicken from the oven, I'd complained, too. Dad was working the three-to-eleven shift, and sometimes

when he worked we had something simple like pizza. “Chicken and vegetables,” I’d growled. “Why can’t we ever have anything good?”

My surliness continued. Mom had been patient. Kind. But by the time bedtime rolled around, she and I had a shouting match in our long, dark hall. I still remember her pink toes poking out from under her blue bathrobe. Her hair was swept back in a ponytail and anger flushed her freckled face.

“I think you’d better get to bed,” she’d said. “You can start again tomorrow. But I’m telling you, I’ll be talking with your father tonight.

I’d trounced off, bare feet slapping linoleum, and flopped on my bed. After a long while, I slipped under the covers, but I couldn’t sleep. Something unexpected met me in the darkness.

Regret.

Sorrow.

Sadness.

Why had I treated Mom like that? If I had only been willing to share, she would've pulled a chair close, looked into my eyes and listened. But instead I'd let her become my verbal punching bag. Surely a hefty consequence would follow.

Sleep didn't come, and somewhere near midnight I heard a creak in the hallway. Was it Dad coming to talk with me? By then, remorse had brought a gentle flow of tears. I wiped them away in the darkness, but before long the door opened and my room was filled with soft light.

It was Mom.

She sat on my bed and leaned close. "Why don't you come down to the kitchen?" she said. Her voice was a whisper and a tendril of her long, blond hair brushed over my cheek.

I pulled my robe from the back of my desk chair and followed her down the long hall. And what I found in the kitchen is something I'd never forget.

A table for two.

Two burgers sizzled on the griddle, newly covered with thick slices of cheese. Two milkshakes in tall, frosty glasses.

I stood, amazed, while Mom pulled a cookie sheet of fries from the oven.

I deserved a consequence. A punishment.

But Mom met me with grace.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “Please forgive me.”

“I will,” she said. “I love you, Shawnie. I understand what it’s like to be in between a woman and a girl. It can be a tough place.” She held me close. I cried cleansing tears. After a few minutes, Mom and I sat down.

We talked half the night, sharing cheeseburgers, sharing fries, and sharing hearts.

I don't know when I'd experienced such love. When I think back, I can still remember the quiet of darkness broken by our voices, the delicious goodness of having my mom all to myself, the way her green eyes met mine with compassion and forgiveness.

She closes her story by saying: "I don't think there's a thing in the world like the capacity of a parent to love a child.

Does it remind you, a little, of the Lord's kind of love?

Hopefully it does. Because the love of our Lord is always there. He is our Good Shepherd.

This theme fills our readings. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and His sheep know His voice, and not one of them can ever be taken out of His hand. So on our part, it's worth thinking about how much we are loved and not fearing opening our hearts and souls to Him, and trusting in Him and the guidance the Church gives us to lead us to Him.

If you think back to Holy Thursday and the Last Supper, Jesus shocks the apostles and washes their feet. It's an act of service. But Jesus in this action isn't just saying do acts of charity for others. That's part of it. But He's also calling us to imitate Saint Peter.

With Jesus, like a young Shawelle, sometimes we can keep our pain bottled up inside. Our sins, our struggles. Our faith can't just be a going through the motions each week but needs to be about an authentic relationship with God, where we open our hearts to Him. Faith formation also continues long past confirmation. We need to let Jesus bend down and wash our feet. We talk a lot about service and rightfully so. But it's worth asking yourself, are you also being served too?

For one, we have to let Jesus serve us and guide us. The Church is there to shepherd us as She interprets revelation, but also gives us the sacraments. It's worth looking at your faith life from time to time. We're here at Mass, that's great. But do you try to take your faith deeper by making an examination of conscience? Do you let God speak to you by praying during the week and thinking about your faith? Do you come to God with your sins, your fears, your anxieties and let Him reach out to you? Do you let the

Church shepherd you with Her guidance of the teachings of our faith, even what you might find challenging? He knocks at the door of our heart; we need to open it up. God doesn't just want to hear the good stuff, for He knows what we are going through just like Shawnelle's mom does, so let him in.

Second, do you let others serve you? If you add up the things our moms do for us over the course of a lifetime, it would be a very long list indeed. But as we age, sometimes we think we grownups need to figure it all out on our own, like the stereotypical husband who can't ask for directions when he's lost on a family vacation. We all go through valleys though, and we all need help. So it's so important to ask for advice, to admit when maybe we can't do something right and need guidance, or to seek people out who like Shawnelle's mom will just listen to us when we need someone.

Lastly, as the Good Shepherd and so many of our moms too show us like Shawnelle's, we shepherd one another. Life is hard, and you don't have to be 12 years old like she was to need guidance and help. We all do but like her, "help" can be such a tough word to say. We need to shepherd each other when we see one another hurting; we need to help people young and

old in our lives and families who may be making bad decisions, or not see God or the importance of the faith. And sometimes we just need to first listen and then advise. It's so easy to get lost, to follow false voices in this world - God serves us but also guides us through the Church, and so must we do for one another.

So many of us are so busy, and our moms are among the busiest of the busy. We learn so much about service and loving one another through all that they do. But over the years, I've learned so much from what my parents do in turning to God and making Him so important in their lives, because they realize without Him, they, like all of us, run on an empty tank and will be lost. Thankfully whether we are seeing Him clearly or need Him to pick us up and place us on His shoulder, He will always do that. So let's not be afraid to have our feet washed, to say as Saint Peter did when He was sinking in the water "help me Lord" and realize Jesus is always there. When we do that, we're so much better equipped to do that for one another too. Being a sheep and being a shepherd - we are truly both, and with us every step of the way is the Good Shepherd who will lead us Home, so let's not be afraid to follow Him.