

All We Like Sheep

By Keith E Gatling

Sermon for July 24, 1994

Lessons for the Ninth Sunday After Pentecost - Year B

Psalm 23

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Ephesians 2:13-22

Mark 6:30-34

Sheep. What do you think of when you think about sheep? They're cute, they're soft and cuddly...and they're dumb. Yup, they're dumb, dim, stupid, clueless. I asked a friend of mine who grew up with sheep about this, and she pretty much said that they wouldn't have a clue if you gave them all four letters and put the first three in order.

"They were like sheep without a shepherd."

"The Lord is my shepherd."

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture."

What's this saying? We're like sheep...and we are without a clue. You, me, all of us.

Now before you take this too personally, and start preparing the tar and feathers, let's consider what this really means. If we're like sheep, if we're clueless, this means that quite often the things we do wrong, the things we do that hurt other people, aren't a result of malicious intent, but from being clueless. Don't get me wrong here, there are still plenty of times when we're, as Garrison Keillor would say, "Just plain rotten," but I

think that for most of us, our problem comes from being clueless.

This also means that many times when we think we're doing the right thing, when we think we're doing what God really wants us to do and have the opinions that God really wants us to have, we're really way out in left field. To paraphrase Maxwell Perkins, most of the harm in this world is not done by people who are truly evil (of which there are blessed few), but by people with the best of intentions. What we have very often is not so much a battle between good and evil, but more likely a battle between competing goods.

Protestant vs Catholic, ELCA vs LCMS¹, Democrats vs Republicans, Pro-Life vs Pro-Choice, cloth diapers vs disposables. We each honestly disagree on the positions here because we're like those sheep...clueless. We have some information...some information. Enough to convince us that we really are doing the right thing, and that those who disagree with us are obviously and obstinately wrong. But we don't have *all* the information, the information that might tell us that it's not a case of picking A or B, but maybe it's O. And even if we did have all the

information, I'm not sure we'd be able to process it.

So what's my point, and how am I going to tie some theology into this so that it's a real sermon and not a Rotary Club address? I'm not saying that knowledge will give us a clue and make us less sheep-like. We'll leave that for the Gnostics. No...to me being likened to a sheep and being called clueless is incredibly freeing. Why? Because it means that contrary to what some of you who know me might think, I don't have to always be right. Being a sheep, being clueless frees me to be wrong every now and then...often...a lot. Because Jesus saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd...and had compassion on them.

Hey...Jesus knows I'm stupid, okay? He knows I can't figure it all out, and that I'm gonna get it wrong most of the time. And it doesn't matter. He sees that I'm a sheep that's wandered off in the wrong direction because I was clueless...sincere, but clueless...and he comes to get me. That's good news. That's really good news...I'm not totally out of luck if I try my hardest and make a wrong turn. I've got a shepherd who's looking out for all of his dumb sheep.

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We all know that line. Jesus said it on the cross, about the very people who put him there. What's it mean in real English? "God, forgive these people, for they are *sooo* clueless." Jesus had compassion on those who were clueless enough to kill him...people who probably would've treated him much

differently had they understood who he was and what was at stake...people much like us, who probably did the wrong thing in good faith.

Being called a sheep also frees me to consider that even though I may disagree with you, you might be right. In fact it forces me to say that, since being a sheep means that there's a good chance that I'm wrong on any particular issue. It frees Democrats to consider that maybe Republicans aren't all selfish people who want to hoard all their money and Republicans to consider that maybe Democrats don't just want to take their hard earned money and give it someone who hasn't even seen "hard work" in the dictionary. It frees Pro-Choice people to see Pro-Lifers as people who are genuinely concerned about the babies and Pro-Lifers to see Pro-Choicers are people who are genuinely concerned about the mothers.

It frees us as members of one Christian denomination to be able to tell members of another that we know where we disagree, but we don't know where we're right and they're wrong.

Now that's a tough one. I've gotta say that the Catholics might be right...or Missouri Synod Lutherans? Yes...but because we're *all* sheep, they have to do the same thing, because none of us has it all.

And this reminds me of a joke I heard.

One day Bishop Chilstrom's assistant went into his office and said, "Bishop, I have some good news for you and some bad news for you. Which would you like first?"

The Bishop said, "Give me the good news first."

His assistant said, "The good news is that Jesus is on the phone and wants to talk to you."

Bishop Chilstrom said, "Wonderful! So what's the bad news?"

His assistant paused for a moment and said, "He's calling from St Louis."²

There's good news in that joke. There's good news whether it's Bishop Chilstrom receiving a call from St Louis or the Pope receiving a call from Salt Lake City. That good news is that even when we're at our most clueless we have a shepherd who still wants us and has compassion on us.

Now that I've said all that, notice what I'm *not* saying. I'm not saying that being like sheep makes everything we do okay. It's not an excuse. We can't just say, "Hey, I'm a clueless sheep, what do you want from me?" It's an explanation, just a statement of fact. We do a lot of things that end up hurting people because we're clueless, but that doesn't excuse us from at least *trying* to get it right, and it doesn't mean that we

shouldn't try to fix those things we've messed up. We still have a responsibility to try to do the best we can, but we also know that when we fail, and we will fail from time to time, it's not the end of the world. Our salvation doesn't hinge on us being perfect. It hinges on the shepherd...a shepherd who knows he's dealing with a bunch of some of the dumbest creatures there are, and who is willing to cut us some slack.

The important thing here is being willing to admit that we're clueless. None of us really likes to admit when we're wrong, but how can the shepherd help us if we're not willing to admit that we might be lost? If we stubbornly and tenaciously insist that we're right and aren't even willing to entertain the possibility that we may be even slightly off, how can the shepherd bring us back to where we're supposed to be?

We're like sheep, and sheep are dumb. But if being a sheep gives me a shepherd with such great compassion, then I don't think that being a sheep is so baa-aa-aa-aad.

¹. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America vs Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. We're ELCA.

². The headquarters of the LCMS.