

I Just Wanna Be A Sheep

April 21, 2024

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Were any of you familiar with the song I taught the kids during Children's Time? "I Just Wanna Be A Sheep" is a staple among the church camp crowd, although when I learned it there were a couple of verses about Pharisees and Sadducees that I now recognize as antisemitic.

One of the graces of campfire songs (and jazz for that matter) is how they can be redacted to eliminate something that might be offensive and still be relevant. We actually had someone else scheduled to offer our Children's Moments today, but as I was praying about which direction the Holy Spirit was leading my reflections today, I asked if I could do it, because it dovetails so well with the message of the Gospel.

"I Just Wanna Be A Sheep" stands in stark contrast to the way the term "sheep" has been used in recent years. I can vividly remember a former neighbor of mine when I lived in Milwaukee for whom calling someone a sheep was his highest form of insult. Believe in equal rights? Sheep. Trust science? Sheep. Listen to mainstream media? Sheep. The idea among those who hurl the word sheep as an insult is that the person they're judging is engaging in herd mentality, just following the crowd.

I hadn't thought much of it until I read an article on the subject last spring by Father Nathan Monk. Father Monk is a former Orthodox priest who now makes his living as an author and social observer. His writing isn't for everyone. It's gritty, and he drops in expletives like sprinkles on a birthday cake, but most of the time he has pretty good theology and he's excellent with reclaiming metaphors.

That's what he did last spring with the idea of being a sheep. He, too, recalled being called a sheep in recent years, but instead of just rolling his eyes at the accuser, he instead holds the term sheep up against our scriptures today, and the countless other times that we hear of Jesus as our shepherd. Father Monk notes that, while in most of the parables Jesus is usually pretty edgy, when he talks about being a shepherd there's a real tenderness.

"There is a tenderness when Jesus discusses sheep or the concept of him being the Good Shepherd that doesn't exist in the others. Typically, he told tales about the end of the world, his own death, or the wealthy being trapped in Hades watching beggars drink water. Then he's suddenly all, 'Basically, I'm a shepherd, and these are my adorable little lamby lambs.'

The part of the Good Shepherd parable that really sticks out to me is that Jesus says his sheep will know his voice. They will recognize him and know that he is safe because the shepherd wants to make sure that they are cared for and fed. He is basically explaining that if the sheep are part of his flock, they can't be duped into following another shepherd. They'll know it's really someone who has come to steal them."

Of course, all of this begs the question, how will we know the voice of the Good Shepherd, our shepherd, from others? The Gospel verse immediately before the passage assigned for today tells

us, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Friends, so often it can feel like our world is spiraling down the drain. Read the news and you’ll get the distinct impression that we’re hurtling toward oblivion. Not a week goes by that a church member doesn’t lament to me just how scary the headlines are.

To that, I’ve started assigning people to google “data that human life is getting better.” By almost every metric, human life is getting better. Part of why I found Father Monk’s reclaiming of the term sheep from those who would use it as an insult is that in times of chaos, Father Monk is spot-on that fear isn’t what Jesus wanted for his disciples. Jesus’ way was to protect and to nurture and to heal. If we’re trying to discern between the voice of the Good Shepherd and the voice of the thief in the night, the scriptures tell us that the thief will kill and destroy, while the shepherd leads to abundant life, and not just for an individual sheep, but for the whole flock.

“This is why we are called to love our enemies and pray for those that persecute us. Instead of being insulted, we should feel for them because that means they are following the thief because they forgot the shepherd’s voice and started following the wolf instead.”

(Monk)

In that same neighborhood where the neighbor to the right of me regularly called me a sheep, the neighbor to the left of me would talk with me about struggling to discern which voices in the media, and even in the church, to listen to. She, quite rightly, said that every pastor she ever encountered claimed to be leading people in the right way, even though they were often going in very, very different directions.

The advice I gave her is a practice that I’ve shared from this pulpit before, but bears repeating. When you encounter a voice or a teaching or an argument and you’re struggling with whether or not it’s of God, ask yourself what you know to have been Jesus’ core messages. At the absolute center of Jesus’ teachings and practices were love, compassion, mercy, justice, forgiveness, inclusion, the preferential option for the poor, changing systems so that society works for more and more people, etc. If the voice you’re wondering about following harmonizes with these things, you can rest assured that it’s not leading you astray. If, however, it is discordant with these core values and practices of Jesus, you’ve found yourself a thief.

Enemy

Shifting gears a little bit, along with “I Just Wanna Be a Sheep” another phrase that has been repeatedly grasping for my attention as I pray this week’s scriptures is from the Psalm, where we read that the shepherd, “sets a table for me in the presence of my enemies.”

My colleague Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes:

“When the Beloved prepares the table your enemies aren’t just onlookers. They’re invited.

“There is only one table. Jesus sets the Passover table and seats Judas right beside him, in the place of honor.

“The Beloved sits beside you, your enemy across from you. (The Beloved sits beside them, too.)

“And you both feast on the same grace, the same cup overflowing, the same goodness and mercy.”

Isn't that a kicker? My enemies get the same grace I do, with cups overflowing with goodness and mercy. I think this idea of God setting a table for both me and my enemies keeps popping up for me this week because I spent the last several days with 17 brilliant changemakers from across the state studying how other cultures have mitigated violence, particularly around elections.

One key takeaway echoed some of what I preached about on St. Patrick's Day, when we looked at forgiveness and reconciliation in the context of war and terrorism and societal violence. Key to violence mitigation, key to forgiveness and reconciliation, is developing a shared identity. When I can point to something I share with this person who I understand to be my enemy, it's harder for me to harm them, and them me.

There was a city in Bosnia that, for the most part, stayed out of the war because local leaders worked feverishly to forge a sense of local identity above and beyond being Serb or Croat. Similarly in Colombia, leaders were able to draw people away from participating in guerrilla militias by appealing to their shared nostalgia of wanting to be home for Christmas.

When I read “you set a table for me in the presence of my enemies” this year, I envision God hosting a dinner party, sitting me down across the table from the person whose views are polar opposites of mine, and saying, “Oh my gosh! I'm so excited that the two of you are finally getting to meet! I love you both! You have so much in common!” and then getting distracted and my enemy and I have to sit there until we figure out what in the world God could possibly see in them.

Conclusion

One of the things that continually astounds me is how scripture texts like the 23rd Psalm and the parable of the Good Shepherd can continue to bear new insights, despite being so familiar. So, whether our time together has compelled you to work to find common ground with an enemy or has reminded you of the core melodies our Good Shepherd sings, I hope the next time someone mocks you for doing what is kind and good and merciful and compassionate, you'll just discretely hum to yourself, “I Just Wanna Be A Sheep.”

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Psalm 23; John 10:11-17

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