

“HOW TO BE A ‘SUCCESSFUL’ SHEEP!”

Easter 4A
April 26, 2015

Peace Lutheran Church
Grass Valley, CA

CONFIRMATION/AFFIRMATION/NEW DISCIPLES

A STORY:

The two seniors were out for a stroll, and as seniors are prone to do, started talking about their health problems.

“I have trouble sleeping sometimes,” said he.

“So do I,” said she. “What do you do for it?”

“I count sheep,” he said. “What do you do?”

“I talk to the shepherd.”

TEACHING POINTS:

1. “Why do Christians like sheep so much?”
2. A successful sheep is an obedient sheep.
3. Lessons from the pasture.
4. Christians like sheep so much because we know the truth, we need a shepherd.
5. The shepherd’s invitation to the sheep.
6. Christians like sheep so much because we know the Shepherd.
7. The shepherd invites us into a deeper relationship and to living of an “obedient” life.

THE MESSAGE:

A college student happened to be listening to Handel’s “Messiah” when a non-Christian friend walked in during “All we, like sheep, have gone astray....”

The friend commented, “I don’t understand why you Christians like sheep so much.”

I don’t know how that college student responded to the comment, but I might have responded, “I like sheep so much because I know the shepherd.” But then, of course, I’ve had a great deal of time to think about a great response.

The Fourth weekend of Easter has traditionally been “Good Shepherd” Sunday, a day for us to connect to the wonderful Biblical image of Jesus as Shepherd.

Today I don’t want to focus so directly on the shepherd. I want to focus on the sheep. My idea is that the successful sheep humbles himself or herself before the shepherd to be part of the Shepherd’s plan and thus enjoy the shepherd’s abundance.

On our farm, at one point in my growing up years, we had some sheep. One thing I can tell you about sheep is this: when left to their own devices they always got themselves in trouble. When left to their own instincts, they would always find themselves in scarcity. The sheep that went off on it's own really didn't know where to go to find their way home. Sheep need a shepherd to keep them from getting in trouble. Sheep need a shepherd to lead them to the greenest grass and the stillest water (sheep won't drink from running water, I'm told). Sheep need a shepherd to keep them from following the wolf, to help them find the safe sheepfold, to protect them from danger and harm.

So, the successful sheep, humbles itself before the shepherd, submits to the shepherd's leading, and follows the shepherd's wisdom. The sheep is then blessed with the abundance of life—safety, food, water, shelter.

Visiting Israel a few years ago, the truth of the need for a shepherd was even more vivid. You see, the pastures there are not lush and green at all — not even as lush as the foothills in summer. The pastures are full of rocks, with tufts of grass. Good water is not easily come by. And the ravines and crevasses make great hiding places for thieves, for predators and danger. In this environment, the sheep that doesn't follow the shepherd is in deep trouble. There is no "abundance" of the things that nourish. There is only scarcity and therefore probably death. In Jesus day, just like today, the "successful sheep" is the one who follows the leading of the shepherd. The "successful sheep" is the one who is part of the Shepherd's plan, even when it means going places it doesn't want to go.

So...why do we Christians like sheep so much? Isn't it because we know the truth? Isn't it because we know our need for a shepherd? We know our own "sheep-like" tendencies. We know that our search for "abundance" only leads to "scarcity."

I don't know about you, but I know me. I know that the key to being a successful disciple is humbling myself before God, my shepherd. I know that in order to be a successful sheep, I need to humble myself into God's vision, God's purpose, and to follow, even when it leads me to places I don't really want to go.

Looking over my life, it is abundantly clear that the times that I've been left to (or rather chosen) my own devices, I've got myself into heaps of trouble. "Doing it my own way" has led me along paths of peril. "Following my own dream", has led me to scarcity and pain. "Taking charge of my life" has been the recipe for self-centered decisions short-term solutions for life.

I like sheep so much because I know the truth. I need a shepherd. I need the ONE who is gatekeeper/door/shepherd to lead me into the promise of new life, to green pastures, to living water, to life.

Out on the farm we had a saying, "The grass isn't greener on the other side of the fence." Indeed, it was the same grass. Indeed, it was the same color. But it WAS on the other side of the fence. And beyond the fence was danger and harm. Beyond the fence was, in-fact, the lack of abundance.

Oh, people of God!! Can you hear God's Word? Can you hear our God, our Good Shepherd, calling to us? Inviting us with the voice that we know. Can we hear His voice above all the other voices—voices that want to lure us to greener pastures—pastures which aren't green at all, but simply traps false abundance, false hope, empty promises? Can we hear his voice, "come unto me and rest?"

To be a successful disciple, we humble ourselves before the Good Shepherd, we follow our God's lead to find the abundance of Eternal life!!

Friends, in this vast terrain that we call life, in the vast expanse of the pastures of living, we may not even realize that the shepherd cares us for. We may not even realize God's leading and guiding because it is done so gently.

God gives us full freedom to make our own choices and go our own way, which may blind us to the care of the shepherd. When we are honest with ourselves, when we forget we have a shepherd, we when we invoke our human "freedom", we are probably roaming far from God, far from the "abundant life" and far from the place God has for us.

We Christians like sheep so much because we are sheep. We like sheep so much because we know the Good Shepherd. We know this shepherd, with a hand strong enough to face the cruelest fates of life, strong enough to protect us even from sin and death, calls us with a voice so tender and true. Our shepherd, with strong yet gentle, powerful yet graceful, rugged yet beautiful, pierced yet smooth hands holds us in the gentlest, most eternal, most wonderful way possible.

Holds us with hands that reach out from this table to embrace us and enfold us and draw us close so that we might follow and receive His care.

We wise enough to humble ourselves to this shepherd. To be blessed by His grace, His providing. His way to life abundant.

There is a tension here though. For all of us, particularly for you who are making new commitments for your life of faith at Peace and especially for you, Paul, there is a tension. The tension is this: just at the very time in your life when you are seeking more and more independence, and perhaps even wanting to be a bit pushy about it, God is inviting you into this deeper relationship, inviting you to deepen the relationship that began at your baptism. God is inviting you deepen your "obedience" in depending on the Shepherd. It's a hard call. It is a necessary call.

Why do we love sheep so much? We love sheep so much because we love the Shepherd. In loving the Shepherd, we affirm that we want to be 'successful' sheep. And we respond in the attitude of servant, with obedience in following our Good Shepherd.

Amen.