



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Easter 4 (A)

#### **A Bunch of Sheep**

**[RCL] Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10**

You're a bunch of sheep! Today, those words are hardly a compliment. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened political polarization, and anxiety about war and climate change, the insult of "sheeple" is hurled against pretty much every group, no matter their position. The accusation is that in failing to think critically for oneself, one mindlessly follows the crowd around them like a herd animal.

Sheep are hardwired to follow each other, even if that leads to dangerous situations like proximity to a cliff's edge or away from protection against predators. This insult is not new. Even in ancient Roman writings, the comparison to sheep was a taunt to imply one was easily fooled. Being called a sheep was not a great thing. So why would Jesus, the Psalmist, and the author of 1 Peter all compare God's people to sheep?

Some interpreters resort to hermeneutic gymnastics to do away with the comparison to animals. But perhaps there is a reason these passages persist and the metaphor of people as sheep spans from the Psalms through the prophets of the Hebrew Bible to the Gospels to the epistles. Perhaps the scriptures understand a fundamental and timeless truth about humans whether we like it or not: humans are deeply social creatures.

To be human is to be a social creature. Like sheep, humans can be led astray. Humans like to follow others, and like sheep, humans can also learn to recognize leaders. These are not inherently bad qualities. They are human qualities. To embrace being human, we must embrace the limitations and tendencies that come with being a social creature. We cannot know everything. We have to trust others at some point. And we have to trust that God is the good shepherd. What does that leave us to do, then? If we are to embrace our finitude, does that mean that we are to do away with critical thinking and blindly follow those around us? On the contrary.

There are two ways that today's readings teach us about living into our identity as sheep. The first is that sheep exist in relationship to the shepherd. The Bible calls us to recognize that God is the shepherd and that God shepherds the flock. Furthermore, God is the gate, not us. While there is a supremely human impulse to gatekeep who is in and who is out of our communities, that is not the role of the sheep. Jesus is

clear: “I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” Christians over the centuries have argued and even spilled blood on the “right” ways of thinking, believing, and behaving. And those who did not align with the “right” way were cast from the community. But if Jesus is the gate and the shepherd, we are freed from that task of gatekeeping who is in and who is out.

The gate and shepherd work in concert to protect and guide the flock so that it might flourish. Those words from Psalm 23 are clear that even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is good, comforting, and present with us. The role of the sheep is to trust in God and trust that God will bring abundant life. But that abundant life does not always look the way we might imagine it.

Sometimes, the way of God seems like a path only “sheeple” would follow. The author of 1 Peter writes that following God is not always comfortable or easy. Sometimes, following God’s radical path of love and justice can bring discomfort, pain, and even unjust suffering. The passage from Acts 2 also shows that following God does not always make sense in the eyes of the world: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” Selling everything you have definitely does not seem to make rational sense. And yet, perhaps this is the greatest example of positive human social life. Spurred on by God’s love *as demonstrated by those around them*, the early followers of Christ couldn’t help but be caught up in a contagious generosity: “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.” Inspired by the actions of those around them, tethered to one another, and aware of the needs of their community, they acted out their radical love by entering a life of mutual interdependence.

Activist and author Craig Greenfield tells a story of living in an impoverished Cambodian community during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the national lockdown, when people were unable to go out and earn wages, some people in his community put out a table with a sign that said, in Khmer, “Those who have extra please add to the table, and those who need, help yourself.” Being the 21st century, they then took a photo with a hashtag and tagged their friends on Facebook with a community table challenge. And before long, hundreds of community tables were popping up to serve the needs of communities all over the country. In this time of uncertainty and scarcity, a spirit of sharing and generosity moved through these communities. Craig remarked in an interview, “When we speak of community spirit, I like to think of that as the Holy Spirit’s stirring.” No matter where we are in the world or who our community is, it is good to share. It is good to look after each other. It is good to belong to a flock.

The label of sheep is so acutely offensive in today’s culture because of our high esteem for independence and critical, rational thought. But the Bible shows us that there are other values than independence and cleverness. In an age where every school or institution markets itself as creating leaders, the Bible offers a different lesson. Sometimes, it is good to follow. Sometimes, it is good to be caught up in the contagious fervor of love in an interdependent community. Sometimes, it is good to share, even when—and especially when— things are scarce.

Embracing the strange world of the scriptures can mean embracing uncomfortable metaphors. But when we do open ourselves in humility to these images, we find that they can shine an uncomfortable truth on what it means to be human. The Bible teaches that humans are social creatures. We have creaturely limits. We depend on each other. We follow each other. These are not inherently bad things. In fact, being social means that we can find abundant life by recognizing that God is present in love and generosity and gladness in and through each other. We can spur each other on to love and good deeds. We can inspire and be inspired by living out a life of trust that God will provide.

May we ever follow where God the Good Shepherd leads, learning to recognize where God is calling us, especially when abundant life does not conform to worldly standards of wisdom. Amen.

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