

**16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 19, 2009**

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On warm Sunday mornings in the middle of July I sometimes find myself wondering: who really listens to the Word of God? It's warm; it's humid; it's finally summer. Give us a break.

To that general lassitude, let me add a bit of autobiographical detail (which is usually not my wont as a preacher). I had two weeks of complete wash-out on vacation, got sick toward the end of the period as I was contemplating the ark my family was designing, and had to cut short my delight by paddling home. (There really is only so much one can do with children, indoors, in the rain on Cape Cod. So I was not a happy camper.) The only great break was from not having to prepare any homilies! (Even though I love preaching—usually.)

Personally, I was not feeling well, exasperated, and not at all eager to once again hear, let alone preach, the Word of God. And then I read today's readings, sighed, and vowed I would not preach another word about how stupid sheep are, how derelict some shepherds are, or how insulted some people feel when they think they are compared to the dumb sheep. My heart cried: Enough!!! I was clearly out of practice at this homiletic thing.

I prepared one whole set of homily notes, re-read them, and got immediately depressed. Trust me, with that homily you would all have needed Prozac and a cup of cool water as you left the church this morning.

As I continued to mull, and pray in my dilemma, I had this strange insight. (I am fully able to consider it delusional, perhaps, but nonetheless interesting.) I wonder if this is how Jesus might have been feeling as he sadly confronts the multitude in today's gospel? His exasperation might have been similar to mine this past week. Enough scripture. Enough of the obvious.

He knew Jeremiah's diatribe against the derelict shepherds of Israel. It's always easy to judge others. Shepherds will always fail and let us down. But Jesus confronted a slightly different scenario: in his time, on that lake shore, there were simply *no* shepherds. None to be found. No one was caring, holding, comforting, supporting, the people. They were wandering, seeking, hoping, dreaming with no vision, no leader, no invitation to God's kingdom.

And so, exhausted as Jesus was, he sat them down and began to teach them many things. And in next week's gospel, he will do the simplest of things. He will feed them. It's sometimes that simple, it seems.

I imagined that one of the first things he might have taught them was a song, a song he would have learned as a child from his mother Mary or his

father Joseph. It probably had a beautiful melody and everyone present in that deserted place would have known both the melody and words. He might have begun his teaching by singing a chorus of the song, the psalm we all just sang together. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures....” (I’m quite sure Jesus did not use the melodic theme from the Vicar of Dibly in his version. But you get the idea.)

I bet it calmed them. I bet it calmed Jesus. I bet it calmed the exhausted disciples with him. And the message was so simple and clear: The Lord, and only the Lord, is our shepherd. And that shepherd will never abandon us. Only later in his life would Jesus return to this image and identify himself with the God of Israel as a shepherd. He says in John’s gospel: “I am the Good Shepherd.” It got him in trouble.

Shepherds bring people together, calmly, and in peace. It’s the vision St. Paul speaks of to the Ephesians. For St. Paul’s hearers the biggest wall of division was the ancient Jewish one that separated Jew from Gentile. And Paul writes of Jesus: “...in his flesh he has made both Jews and Gentiles into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility, between us.” “He is our peace.” The true shepherd creates in himself, Paul says, one new humanity in place of the two. That’s what Good Shepherds do—sometimes

just by humming a song.

If Christ Jesus can do it with Jews and Gentiles, surely he can do it with liberal and conservative church-goers today; surely he can do it with Republicans and Democrats (although I have my doubts here listening to the confirmation hearings in the Senate this week); surely he can do it with Hispanics, blacks, natives, and Caucasians; surely he can do it with today's Palestinians and Israelis; surely he can do it with gay people and straight people. You get the point. There is only one body; there is only one shepherd. That *is* our peace! Be calm. Hum the psalm.

Yes, all “authorized” shepherds should be having a sheepish day today listening to Jeremiah. (Sorry about the dreadful pun.)

But what about the rest of us? Ah, we do not get off the hook that easy. Remember the disciples with whom Jesus might have shared that first song, Psalm 23; they were not ordained ministers of any church; they were not bishops, priests, nuns; they were not even baptized yet! We know too painfully from history that Holy Orders does not a good shepherd make. But baptism makes us all shepherds for each other.

We are the ones both wandering with out a shepherd, and invited to become the shepherd ourselves. Yes, it is the blind leading the blind. Always

has been. But the blind have seen a great light and can walk tenderly and confidently toward it—together. There's today's invitation. Enjoy summer.