

Sermon for 15 May 2011
Easter 4, Year A

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

If you're anything like me, you probably don't like to be compared to a sheep. We are, of course, very content to refer to Jesus as "the Good Shepherd", as indeed we make certain to do on this Sunday every year, which has come to be known as "Good Shepherd Sunday", but we're not so keen on the logical implication of Christ being a shepherd, namely, that we're sheep. A lamb's alright: it's both cute and delicious, the greatest combination of traits in the animal kingdom. But a full-grown sheep is big and smelly and dumb. At least that's how we tend to think of them. They blindly follow the shepherd or the *bellewether* like lemmings. Even if these qualities make for easy domestication of a useful beast, they are not traits we value among human beings, hence the derogatory portmanteau

"sheeple", which means somebody who believes whatever they're told and uncritically conforms to whatever pattern of behavior is expected.

But look again at what Jesus is saying. "The sheep follow [the shepherd] because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Perhaps we've underestimated the sheep. As smelly and dumb as they are, they know that their well-being is dependent on the shepherd. They are hard-wired, through their evolutionary history, to follow the leader. They know that their safety is dependent on doing so, and they're smart enough at least to be able to discern between one who will lead them to safety and one who will steal them away.

I wonder if most of us are this discerning. Even those of us who are intuitive enough to discern someone who's genuine from a confidence trickster most of the time, can nonetheless throw

our lot in with a sheep-thief. I don't just mean that we can fall in with a rough crowd, though for some that is an issue. I mean we can totally misplace our confidence, failing to follow the Good Shepherd in favor of some other leader.

And it should be no surprise that for us modern people the most common thief one might trust instead of the Good Shepherd is none other than oneself. Most of you have heard me say things along these lines before, but it bears repeating. Thanks to sin, we believe that we have everything we need within ourselves, and our own culture has exacerbated this fault of our nature. We believe in rugged individualism. We say "God helps those who help themselves" (which I hope you know, comes neither from the bible nor from a Christian thinker), we say we must pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and we believe seeking direction from someone or something outside of ourselves is a weakness.

It is far more difficult for us to *follow*. On this level the sheep might have it more together than we do, because they know when they aren't on the right path. They can recognize the shepherd's voice, and they know they're in trouble when they don't hear it. We humans are so smart that we can convince ourselves that we're going the right way when we aren't. We tell ourselves that on the path of life there's no need to pull over to the gas station to ask for directions or to turn on the GPS device in our car, because we're smarter than that, by gosh.

So, maybe, we shouldn't get offended when we're called sheep. Maybe there's something we can learn from those silly beasts after all. Maybe we can learn that we should cultivate enough humility that we can be led by another. The Good Shepherd is always ready to lead our unruly hearts, but we must be humble enough to receive his direction. Christ is ready to bring us to the heavenly banquet, his

rod correcting us and his staff comforting us along the way, but we can't be haughty or we'll strike out on our own, thinking our own directions better. We already find ourselves in the flock, which is Christ's Church, and the shepherd is leading us as we hear his direction in scripture and prayer and in the breaking of bread. If, then, we are modest enough to listen, to listen carefully to the voice of the Shepherd, we may rest assured that we will be led to the springs of the water of life and will dwell with God in eternity.

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Amen.