

## **“THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT SHEEP”**

**Psalm 23; John 10:1-10**

**April 13, 2008**

**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

The cafeteria at Swedish Hospital in Seattle is much like any other hospital cafeteria: bland, indifferent food, designed to be served to invalids and people who generally do not care what they are eating. But there is one exception. The French fries. I'm not kidding. People from all over the hospital neighborhood mob the Market Café grill, especially at rush hours, sometimes to order a not-great patty melt or reuben sandwich, but mostly to purchase a side of French fries, a full plate of crispy golden, delicious-smelling treats. It doesn't take long to find out about this delight. If you tell a nurse you're setting off to lunch, she'll ask, "Have you tried the French fries?" The volunteer at the information desk directs visitors down to the basement level with a prideful, "Our French fries are famous." I even heard a doctor, talking with a family whose loved one was going off to surgery, saying, "If you take the beeper, you can get something to eat in the cafeteria. The French fries are great."

So what's a person to do? Every time I took the elevator down to B level and wended my way through the maze of corridors leading to the cafeteria, I would have a conversation with myself: "Maybe this is the day you should try the French fries," suggested one voice in my head. "Liz, you know French fries are just bad carbohydrates encased in fat," my stern voice would chip in. "But they're famous," back to voice number one. "and you deserve it," whispers the seductive one. "But they're not healthy," reminds my inner trainer. And on and on it would go, my daily wrestling match with the fries.

From the gospel of John, "The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for them, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him 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."

Jesus is speaking metaphorically here, but the image he uses is one that would have been very familiar to his audience. The Jews of Palestine were well-acquainted with the ways of sheep. They knew that sheep imprint on a single voice, the voice of their shepherd. You can have five flocks of sheep grazing together on a hillside; and when one shepherd decides to move his flock, all he has to do is call to them. His sheep follow; the others remain where they are with close to absolute precision. One voice; one shepherd; one path to follow.

Now I know that there are those among you who don't like thinking of yourselves as sheep, even metaphorically. Our recent years' stewardship experience revealed to us the anti-sheep in some of you. But even the most fervent anti-sheep here need to see and understand this image as it is used in the scripture. Jesus calls out this image of shepherd and sheep not because he wishes us to follow blindly or stupidly, but because Jesus, understanding human nature as he did, knew that the greatest obstacle to faithfulness in us is that we lack sheep's ears. We are not naturally attuned to following one voice. We are creatures of choice. In the vocabulary of John, we are wont to follow strangers. At least most of us have, from both outside us and within us, a

significant number of voices that call our name, that urge us to follow—to do this, to want that, to take a risk here, to not stick our neck out there.

I have a good friend from seminary days, a woman named Marjorie, who calls these competing voices within herself her “Board of Directors,” each with its own concerns and motivations. She identifies on her internal board a manager, a social worker, a CFO, a mother, a philanthropist, a good times girl, a patient, a child, a scoundrel, a scholar, and one very unhappy person who is never satisfied. And, oh yes, along with all the others, there is the voice of God, which, she would assert, is a slippery voice because sometimes it speaks on its own, and other times, it speaks through one of the other voices.

Marjorie calls herself a Protestant contemplative, a term she considers to be something of an oxymoron because we liberal Protestants, we aren’t supposed to be about contemplation. We are activists. We, most of us, come into the United Church of Christ or other liberal protestant denominations, because we believe that faith is tied to action. But Marjorie’s point would be that if we are to be the people of God, if we are to act on God’s behalf, then first we need to seriously consider, we need to get to know and identify all the voices which call our names, the ones outside of us, and the ones inside of us, so we might become better at discerning what is of God and what comes from a place that is definitely not God. We need, like sheep, to develop ears attuned to the voice of our shepherd, not distracted or led astray.

Which is easy to say, but for most of us, hard to do. How many of us have spent the time in quiet consideration to better understand the variety of voices that call our names, the forces that drive us? If I asked you to take a look at your internal dialogues, who of you could easily identify which voices, which motivators are telling you to take this particular action, or write that certain check, or eat the French fries, and what inside you is urging you to maybe take a different course? How do you sort out your internal voices, shepherd or stranger, decide which one or ones will guide your actions? It’s not a trivial question on any account, but it is especially important when we talk about trying to discern the voice or will of God.

Those who would separate reflective life and activist life, make them somehow mutually exclusive, create a false and dangerous dichotomy. My reading and experience demonstrate to me that those who serve God well—those who manage to navigate the ordinary choices of daily life with integrity and reach out to the world beyond them—they are for the most part, those who have intentionally taken the time and discipline to understand their own interior life. I think of the spiritual leaders I have studied: the Dalai Lama, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, all of these were and are maybe not as single-focused as sheep, but very aware, discerning about who and what they choose to follow.

We human beings, we have been gifted by God with wonderful, powerful, and complex minds and hearts, and thus the ability and opportunity to weigh and decide among options. This is both our strength and our weakness, making us capable of incredible acts of courage, fidelity, and self-sacrifice, or leading to duplicity, deviousness, and self-deception. We want to live our lives well; we want to be the people of God. And as we discipline ourselves to do that, the image of shepherd and sheep can be helpful to us. Think about the sheep and pay attention to the voices driving you; think about the sheep and listen for the voice of the shepherd. Thanks be to God.

Amen.