

Last week I mentioned that the vast majority of people around us and in New York State effectively have no religious affiliation and are certainly not interested in joining an organized religion or any institutional faith. We've talked about this at church council any number of times, noting that keeping this congregation flourishing becomes ever more difficult.

I don't want to put our council members on the spot, but Ethan Minkel reminded us of an important correlation. Those parts of our nation with the lowest levels of religious affiliation are New England and New York. And, those parts of our nation with the highest household income and education levels are also New England and New York.

This correlation is nothing new. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote a book called, *On Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. It was aimed at the elite of north Europe who thought themselves above religion.

In seminary we studied American religious history and saw how many of our country's "founding fathers" weren't technically Christian. While *some* indeed were, most would be classified as theists. They believed in God, and while they did not at all reject Christianity, they saw it mostly as a moral structure which was beneficial for keeping the generally uneducated populace in line and creating a good work ethic.

Go all the way back to the ancient Greek philosophers and you find the same thing. They believed that with their superior education and insight they had come to an understanding of things that was greater than religion. Religion was a surface practice of the ignorant and good for leading the ignorant masses.

Isn't it ironic that as Christians and Americans we want people to be hard working and well educated; and yet succeeding often undermines our faith.

Today is often called "Good Shepherd Sunday". In the gospel reading we find Jesus teaching that he is the "Good Shepherd". In the 23rd Psalm we say, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." It all feels warm and safe and cozy; that is until you realize what you are really saying. If Jesus is the

Good Shepherd, and he is your shepherd, then therefore you must be... sheep.

Every time I preach on Good Shepherd Sunday I think I bring up my time in high school when I worked on a neighbors organic sheep farm. I will fully declare that I was not a good shepherd. If shepherding were a course in school I'd probably fail. When I tried to use the shepherds crook to help control the sheep by firmly catching them around the neck I almost always failed. Usually they just outright escaped me. Sometimes they would see me holding out the crook to stop them and they just jumped over it. On the rare occasions that I did actually catch one around the neck I usually ending up flipping them head over heels and they'd end up on their back. Well, I least I stopped them.

You may also remember me saying years past that being a sheep is quite an insulting thing. You know how you can use a thesaurus to find synonyms and antonyms of words? If I ever get to write one, under synonyms for sheep I'm going to put the word "stupid". Sheep are noisy, dirty, uncooperative, miserable beasts who don't know what's best for them. And that last part is the most challenging part. They don't know what's best for

them. Try to give them medicine or move them to healthy pasture or to a stream to drink and they'll probably balk at it.

Being a sheep is no compliment. But indeed human beings are all too much like sheep. What then do we do?

And how do we reconcile our wealth and education with being sheep? Isn't the whole point of being hard working and well educated to be independent? Don't we seek to gain wealth primarily for safety? Money can buy us food and a pleasant house in a safe neighborhood with good schools. Money can buy us insurance against catastrophe. Money can even buy us people's favor and acceptance. Lack of money leads to fear, loss of control, and insecurity - the things we absolutely want to avoid.

I guess the real struggle is how to fully develop our skills and abilities, while at the same time recognizing that we are God's sheep;: needy, helpless, and not always knowing what's the best for us.

Maybe the real question should be our motives. Do we seek to grow and improve ourselves and our situation in life in order

to achieve independence and superiority? Or, do we seek to grow and improve ourselves in order to be more effective for our God?

That is the challenge, and I think that may be the mistake of all too many people. The more you learn the less like a sheep you want to be. You think that by your own abilities you can be your own shepherd. God-as-shepherd is for weaklings.

I think a lot of people see churches and religious institutions as places that claim the authority of God. And God is a divine oppressive force that likes to punish and hold people accountable. Indeed there are many passages in our scriptures that support such ideas.

When I was working with sheep in high school, while I didn't want to oppress or punish the sheep, I did want to forcefully control them. But as I said, I was not a good shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Notice what makes him qualified as a shepherd. Is he better with a shepherd's crook than I was, more capable of catching sheep and controlling them? Was he able to be more burly and oppressive, better able to get the sheep to do his will?

No, Jesus says that what makes him the good shepherd is that he lays down his life for the sheep.

Maybe we are like sheep, but we have a shepherd who truly cares for us anyway. Despite being dirty, noisy, uncooperative and overall stupid, Jesus lays down his life for the life of the sheep. That is empowering, not oppressive. That is saying that despite our failings we're still worth something - worth a lot actually.

I think we get out of the dilemma of wealth and education turning us away from our faith but remembering that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Then our abilities can be truly used to serve him, rather than needed for our own ends.

May you find the gifts that God has given you, and the way you have learned to shape them to help you prosper, be gifts to build up others. May you know that you do not have to use what you have to protect yourself. Your good shepherd will protect you. And may you not find God to be a force which seeks to hurt and punish you, but rather a force that seeks your own good - good pastures, living water, health and contentment. Amen