

Some years ago a parishioner passed along an article about why church-goers switch from one church to another. I'm still not sure if what that parishioner was giving me some meant to be some sort of hint, but according to the research cited in that article, 51 percent of people change churches when they become dissatisfied with the pastor... which makes me think half of you probably have a good reason to switch churches. 44 percent switched when their church [quote] "no long fulfilled their needs." 33 percent said they switched after something changed in their previous church.

That study also explored the reasons why someone who'd switched churches chose their new congregation. 88 percent chose a new church based on the authenticity of the pastor/church members. 87 percent said they chose their new church based on the preaching and 80 percent found the worship style of their new church more appealing.

...
Up until about 3 or 4 decades ago, American culture supported church loyalty out of respect for the church, obligation to family, or social expectations. (In the United Methodist church, if you got a bad apple, you waited 2 or 3 years for the Bishop to appoint a new minister.) Today, the research suggests that the rise of consumerism creates people who seek to customize their every experience (including church) to meet their personal taste. When one's personal taste or preferences are no longer satisfied -- when it's not what "I want" -- it's time to move on.

...
Besides giving me a complex, I offer all this as a beginning point for thinking about what it means to belong to this "flock." (And truly, when I look at around, I can tell that many of you will eventually have good reasons to be disillusioned with me as a pastor.) But I think most of you remain with this flock, because you are wise enough to know the difference between the sound of my voice and the sound of the voice of our Good Shepherd who, in John 10:27 says: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." At best, mine is the voice of a Barely Good Enough Pastor. Jesus' voice is of course, the voice of the Good Shepherd.

...
Using that metaphor -- and this may be uncomfortable -- it becomes clear that Jesus is calling his followers sheep. We may take exception to that because many of us have grown up to understand that sheep are both dim-witted and defenseless creatures. They eat too much; they drink contaminated water, and when they fall, they often need help to get up again. Then there's the whole herding thing -- they tend to follow aimlessly and blindly and with no apparent destination in mind. (Democrats are now thinking, "that sounds Republicans I know" and Republicans are saying, "that sounds like the Democrats I know.") So it's no wonder that we might take exception when we we're likened to sheep. I'll have more to say about ovine intelligence, but let's start off by noting that Jesus was not talking about the average IQ of his disciples when he used the sheep metaphor. Rather, it seems that Jesus was speaking affectionately...

Some of you may have been 4-H members who raised a pet lamb to sell at a county fair. If you ever did that, you know how easy it is to become attached to a woolly little lamb. That was the case in Jesus' day where shepherds lived with their flocks, knew each sheep individually, and would risk their life to save them. So, it was a natural thing for Jesus to describe those who followed him as sheep and to use imagery that revealed his own intimate and tender attachment to them. In early Christian depictions of Jesus, pictures drawn on the walls in catacombs where Christians met to worship in secret; the depictions most often show Jesus as a shepherd carrying a sheep. So, the sheep/shepherd image reveals more about Jesus than it about his disciples.

...
That said, sheep may be more intelligent than we give them credit for. Contrary to conventional wisdom that sheep are stupid, sheep rank just below the pig -- and on par with cattle -- in IQ. A study at the Babraham Institute in Cambridge, England, showed that sheep have remarkable memories. They can pick out a particular face in a line of pictures and researchers found that some sheep in the study recalled up to 50 images for as long as 2 years.

We also know that sheep have keen hearing, which makes it possible for them to discern the voice of *their* shepherd from among many other voices. In Jesus' day, shepherds often gathered their different flocks into a common corral for mutual protection. When it came time to separate commingling flocks out of the corral, each shepherd had their own distinct sound. The sheep, knowing their shepherd's distinct sound, would exit the corral only when they heard their own shepherd's voice; the other sheep stayed put. This is the context for Jesus' affirmation that his sheep hear and respond to his voice.

Finally, sheep will always move toward the person they perceive to be a friend, particularly if that friend feeds them. (And I am guessing that some of us relate to that!)

...
So sheep aren't as dumb as we think. Unless — they are scared. One researcher believes that the sheep's reputation for stupidity is because sheep are afraid of just about everything. But this researcher notes, "Any animal, including humans, once they are scared, don't tend to show signs of intelligent behavior." Fear causes a flock to disintegrate, and when sheep are driven apart that's when they're most vulnerable.

Jesus understood that it was his voice — God's voice — to which his "sheep" would come running, no matter how far they'd strayed, no matter how scared they were. Again, Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

...
Thus, while the Good Shepherd understands the language of the flock, it is up to the sheep to use whatever intelligence they/we can muster to train our ears to recognize the voice of the Shepherd, the one who will feed us and nourish us for abundant life. But more often, if we are being honest, the problem is not when we as the sheep of Jesus' fold fail to recognize the voice of the Shepherd! Rather, the problem is how often we mute out the voice of the Shepherd when what we hear challenges us to change in any way.

We have no problem listening when Jesus' voice when we are hearing words of comfort and reassurance. It is when the Shepherd calls us to

follow -- sometimes through the valley of the shadow of death, or self-denial, or obedience, or self-sacrifice, or unconditional love, or accountability — well then, we don't hear so well. *We become scared of where Jesus might be leading us.* And when we're scared, like sheep, we begin to do stupid things. We take a wrong turn, we make ill-advised decisions, we become self-destructive and we quit caring about the well-being of anyone but ourselves.

...
A UM bishop writes that no one ever says the type of things Jesus said without getting into trouble. He writes, "You just don't say things like [Jesus said] and get tenure" [and so] time and again Jesus says things we wish he hadn't! About giving away all that we have, about loving our enemies, about religiosity being a barrier to receiving God's grace. For most of us the problem isn't that we find what Jesus says incomprehensible, it's that we find what he says too darn difficult. (Love our enemy? He couldn't *really* have meant that... What if we just pray for our enemy instead? Forgive those who have caused us pain? How about after they get what's coming to them?)

Which brings me back to the article about switching churches. I'm not sure of how good or bad the reasons are in the research about people who switch churches. But the main point of Jesus' teaching is that we can't make it on our own. We need others and we need God, which is the whole reason for the church.

In a world that's increasingly more scattered and scared, our task as Christ's Church is to constantly and compassionately translate and transmit the voice of the Good Shepherd to those who are lost, hurting, and alone. It's about following Jesus' example and welcoming everyone into the sheepfold. And it's about rehearsing and reciting and repeating the words Jesus spoke, even when his words aren't particularly popular. May the Holy Spirit intercede within in us and equip us to listen carefully for the voice of the Good Shepherd as he calls us out and invites us share the gifts we've received because of his goodness.