

EASTER IV

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. John 10: 21

In a few moments we will welcome Payton, Lewis, and Gabriel into the body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. As always, this is a joyful time for us here at St. John's, made particularly exciting because of the small crowd of candidates, their advanced ages – meaning that they're old enough to understand what's happening to them, at least, better than an infant does– and because it's the Easter season, an especially appropriate time for baptisms.

Last week, Bishop Tom Shaw was here, bringing with him his episcopal staff, which, as he pointed out, looks like a shepherd's crook, only fancier. Bishop Shaw sat on the floor to talk with the children, and I'm not sure that even those of you who were here could hear him all that well. He talked about his staff, or crook, and how it was used by shepherds to keep sheep in line.

He said that sheep aren't very smart. Since he was making analogies between sheep and shepherds and his "flock" of Episcopalians and flocks of sheep, I asked if, in that case, Episcopalians aren't very smart either. He looked a bit taken aback. But he needs to think about these things. I mean, I don't even have an Episcopal staff, and I think about them every time these lessons about sheep come up in the lectionary.

I used not to like them, because I believed this rumor about sheep being dumb. But then I read somewhere that that's a bum rap. And here's what the internet told me the other day.

Until they get to know them, many people see sheep as dull and uninteresting animals. The truth is very different. Sheep have uniquely individual natures and are social, intelligent animals. (*Animals Australia*)

So sheep are not stupid. What they are is social.

As prey animals, they have a highly- developed flocking instinct, and prefer to move in groups rather than as individuals.... and they are dependent on their flock for safety and comfort. They become highly distressed when separated from their flock, their fear evident when they call out for other members of their group and they will strive to rejoin the group.

Now I like this definition! Because I think it applies to much of what it means to belong to Christian community, much of the meaning of what we are baptizing Lewis, Gabriel and Payton into today.

Christianity is a group religion. It is a religion of community. Not a religion of conformity – at least, not for us Episcopalians. Particularly not for us, as we are not a confessional denomination, not a rigid one, in the main. What holds us together is not a doctrinal sameness or rigidity, but common worship. Throughout the world, Anglicans and Episcopalians hear the same lessons each week – and the same lessons as Roman Catholics and many Protestant denominations as well – and use similar liturgies. But beyond that, we encompass a wide spectrum of theological beliefs and social and political convictions.

But we worship together, and we participate in community life together. We see our spiritual lives and our salvation – whatever salvation may mean – as inextricably connected and intertwined. When one member of the body of Christ suffers, we all suffer. When one rejoices, we all rejoice.

My website source on sheep comments

It is often difficult for people to recognise and understand sheep behaviour, because most of us are not used to being around sheep.

Now people who are not part of the body, or flock, don't understand us. And those who have been injured by participation in a faith tradition through abuse of one kind or another – abuse by an individual or through doctrinal rigidity – may have rejected what they see as herd mentality. People whom we call “unchurched” or those who have departed from an unhelpful faith tradition, don't comprehend why we do what we do: why we gather to worship together on Sundays, why we devote precious discretionary time to parish projects, why we care.

Bishop Shaw advised last Sunday that the best way to understand our tradition is to participate in it, regularly and seriously. And this is what I tell people when they inquire about baptism. I can't count how many times I've had this dialogue with people who are not members of the congregation when they desire to have their children baptized.

It goes like this. “We'd like to have my child baptized at St. John's”

I reply, “We baptize the children of people who are regular participants in our parish life. “

“What if we have the child baptized and then start coming to church?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way. You come to church for awhile and then we do the baptism.”

Often, that’s the last I hear from them.

Recently I had a more extensive interchange with someone who claimed she’d been an active member of St. John’s in the mid-nineties. But I can’t remember her at all, nor can anyone I asked who was here then. In any event, she has had twins and would like them baptized. I went through my “come to church” routine. Email silence for awhile, then she wrote to say that they were going to have a baptism in Minnesota with one set of godparents and would I do another baptism here, later, with the other set, who could not travel to Minnesota?

I replied that there are no second baptisms. A baptism into the Christian tradition is once for all. Some denominations disagree, but that’s our Anglican theology on the matter.

Then she wanted to know if I could suggest someone from another tradition who might perform a local ceremony that would be “a kind of welcome to the world.” I replied that I would be willing to consider creating such a ceremony myself, that we are able to be creative, but, at the risk of repeating myself endlessly, such a “welcome” would be into the community here, once the family had become regular attendees.

That’s the last I’ve heard from her.

I don’t like to say no to people who want something from the Church. But when people ask for the sacrament of baptism with, apparently, no understanding of what that sacrament means in terms of commitment, I do say no. On a few occasions I’ve been conned: parents assure that they plan to become active members of St. John’s and come to church regularly until the baptism, and then they disappear. Few things in parish ministry are more painful to me. I feel used, personally, and on behalf of the parish, and, really, on behalf of the sacrament of baptism.

Baptism, like all sacraments, has a deep element of mystery about it. The prayer we are about to pray talks about dying and being reborn with Christ. How can we possibly understand that fully? We can’t. We can only live it; we can only spend our lives living in the body of Christ and trying to grasp the divine within us and within the communion of saints that we have joined.

We can't understand it. But what we do know, those of us who are living out our baptismal covenant, is that the rite of baptism is not the equivalent of getting our immunizations. It's not something on a checklist of to-dos for our children. It's a commitment to a way of life, to a set of values, and to a body – a group of others who, throughout time and space, have made the same commitment. It's a dedication to “the peace of God/ which is no peace.” A peace, we learn, that makes all the difference.

At the end of the activities last Sunday I passed quickly by one of the boys we're about to baptize– I'm sorry I don't know which one– and said, “See you next Sunday.”

“Yes,” he said, “We *have* to be here. “

“Right, you do,” I told him.

That's the thing. You have to be here. Alleluia!

Amen