

Problem: What does being a sheep in the flock mean?

-There's a silly little camp song that I remember teaching kids when I was a camp counselor: "I just wanna be a sheep bah bah bah. I just want to be a sheep bah bah bah. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. I just wanna be a sheep bah bah bah. Don't want to be a goat No! Don't want to be a goat No! Haven't got any hope No! I just wanna be a sheep bah bah bah!" As you can imagine, the kids got into this song with full gestures and voices.

-Today is "Good Shepherd Sunday", a Sunday where the church historically has said "I just want to be a sheep" in numerous ways (maybe without the bah bah bah's)

-In order to say loudly, "I just want to be a sheep", we have the top 10 blockbuster sheep hits in our readings: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they know me" (John) and "The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not be in want." (Psalm 23)

-Now, maybe it's the curse of my millennial skepticism, or maybe it's the large amount of stupid cartoons I have seen over the years of a nicely groomed, white, American looking Jesus as shepherd leading a group of single file "Shaun the sheeps" up a mountain. -Whatever it is, "being a sheep bah bah bah bah" many times strikes me as boring, conforming, too uniform, and too simplistic. I'm my own person with my own faith, not some sheep kicked into line with the rest of the flock.

-So, does Jesus really mean this when he calls us his sheep? Or does he mean something different? What does it mean for me to say "I just want to be a sheep" and does it have any use at all for us today?

Solution: Being a sheep doesn't mean we sit back and enjoy the grass. Instead we are called to test the boundaries and do things.

-When I was in Israel/Palestine a couple of years back, I remember walking to Herodian: a huge palace that King Herod built during the time of Jesus whose ruins are located just outside of Bethlehem. The ruins are at the top of this big mound with a road that you have to walk to get up to the top. When our group was walking up this road, I saw a young boy who seemed to be walking out in the rocky, dry landscape about 100 feet from the road. He kept picking up rocks and throwing them. When I got closer, I saw a large flock of sheep out in the distance and realized that this boy was a shepherd. I first was appalled at the fact that he seemed to be throwing rocks at the sheep, but began to notice that his aim was much more exact. He wasn't throwing rocks at the sheep, we was throwing rocks beside the sheep. His flock wasn't what you would call "nicely put together", but organized in clumps: several groups of sheep running around and exploring the landscape. Some of the sheep bounded down the hillside a bit and found what appeared to be some grass. Realizing that this "rogue group of sheep" might have found some food/water, the shepherd threw some rocks just next the sheep on the opposite end of the flock in order to get them to head in the direction of the "rogue group" which found this nutrient rich path. It was amazing to me to see how the

shepherd wasn't leading them in the hollywood way of walking in front with a big staff, but allowing them to act and go their own way for a bit before being encouraged to stay together. It was a constant push pull between the shepherd and the flock that was amazing to watch.

-The sheep weren't really bugged at all by these rocks. Infact, they seemed to be smarter than we give them credit for: most of the time after a rock was thrown they looked up and checked where the rest of the group was. The rock was a reminder, not a scare tactic.

-It's not the same image of shepherd and flock that I was taught in Sunday School. It's, perhaps, a more accurate image of what Jesus is referring to as "I know my flock and my flock know me."

-What our church has historically taught is that following Jesus is a uniform act, but what I saw just outside of Bethlehem was anything but uniform.

-“Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixedness.” -Mike Yaconelli (pastor and faith writer)

-Peter knew the real messiness of the flock. He knew in his culture how worthless women were seen to be, especially widows. Yet, he was the sheep who came anyways and through God healed this “disciple” (this is the *only* time in the entire New Testament that the greek word disciple is used in its feminine form). Sometimes it takes a long time for the rest of the flock to catch up. And to be honest with you, the rest of the flock still hasn't caught up in proclaiming that women are just as much filled with the Holy Spirit as men are and just as capable (at times, maybe even more capable) of leading the church.

Implication: “And I will dwell in the expanding house of the LORD forever.” Our work is to push the bounds of who can dwell and be healed in the house with us.

-We need those sheep who bound down the hill in search of new things. We need those who push the boundaries as well as help pull the flock together. That's, I think, the forgotten meaning of what it means to be a sheep and follow Christ: to lead and help the flock go to new places which are closer to God.

-“Celebrating God's love in Christ, we gather to be nurtured in faith, welcoming all people to share with us God's blessings” You know this is a radical mission statement if you think about it. “Welcoming all people to share with us God's blessings”. With a statement like this, we might be the clump of sheep down the hill waiting for the rest of the flock to catch up. We might be the ones forging new territory for the church. Because if we actually welcome *all* people, then we are the ones like Peter at the dead widow's bedside. We are the sheep that in our context are the ones (instead of at the widow's bedside) healing the Muslim, or the millennial agnostic, or the black man, or the drug relapsed Native American single mom. We are the sheep at the bedside of our

Earth which is ravaged by Climate Change and all of the creatures on the verge of extinction. We are the sheep that welcome all to share with us God's blessings.
-I just want to be sheep. Want to follow? Amen.