

“The *Really* Good Shepherd”
1 Samuel 16:1-17; Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18
Easter 4 B
May 3, 2009

Pastor John R. Pederson
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado

Before we get born away by the nostalgia of the fair robed Caucasian shepherd with the oh-so-supplely curved staff and romanticize this shepherd business beyond recognition, we had best consider the shepherd from the sheep’s perspective. For that, as Isaiah dubs us, is what we are. For the plain truth be told, it is not clear that the sheep want a shepherd at all.

In a landmark study, which won the 2006 *Christian Century* Book Award for Christianity and Culture, Christian Smith reported on what teenagers actually had to say about God and their faith.¹ Countering the oft-repeated stereotype Smith determined in over 250 interviews over 45 States that young people are overwhelmingly conventional. That is, they tend strongly to reflect in their lives the exact contours of their parents’ values, beliefs, and religious commitments. Keep that in mind, for it could mean that what we learn about young people we also learn about ourselves.

He found that young people talk about their faith was “paltry,” “tepid,” and amazingly uninformed. When religion operated in these lives, it operated deeply in the background. We would say they take faith as “for granted.” When asked what was important to them in their lives religion/spirituality never came up. In example after example they were unable to articulate even the most basic religious tenets.

Mainstream Protestants were the single most inarticulate about their faith. Anecdotally, a seventeen-year old from Colorado said, “Uh, well, I don’t know, um, well, I don’t really know. Being a Lutheran, confirmation was a big thing but I really don’t know what it was and still don’t.”² If the word *grace* means anything to these folks, it is only as the character from the television comedy *Will and Grace*.

Now we’re not here today to diagnose this problem and fix blame. We are here to consider the noble shepherd we sheep have.

They admitted that religion was probably helpful, but only as a vague life strategy for being liked by the right people, achieving some success in life by preventing the dead

¹ Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Smith, “God, Religion, Whatever,” *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 118-71.

² *Ibid.*, pp 131-2.

ends of drugs, crime, or living in an undisciplined way. Religion was useful for, as my father used to say to me growing up, for “keeping your nose clean.” Faith for them was instrumental, a means to other ends. They believed themselves, it must be finally said, to be living in a morally and religiously insignificant universe.³ Smith writes,

What our interviews almost never uncovered among teens was a view that religions summons people to embrace an obedience to truth regardless of the personal consequences or rewards. Hardly any teen talked directly about more difficult religious subjects like repentance, love of neighbor, social justice, unmerited grace, self-discipline, humility, the costs of discipleship, dying to self, the sovereignty of God, personal holiness, the struggles of sanctification, glorifying God in suffering, hungering for righteousness Viewed in terms of the absolute historical centrality of the Protestant conviction about salvation by God’s grace alone, through faith alone and not by any human good works, many belief professions by Protestant teens, including numerous conservative Protestant teens, in effect discard that essential Protestant doctrine.⁴

Now, do you remember where we started this study of young people. Conventionally, they lived their lives and sought to live their lives in the future in the footsteps of their parents. And if that is true, then they caught these religious attitudes from someone. It seems they have gotten them from their parents.

So then, what is said of the teenagers can also – must also – be said of their parents.

Smith has coined a particularly apt phrase to capture this was of thinking about one’s faith, one’s spirituality. It is “moralistic therapeutic deism,” and it has five main tenets. See how many you agree with.

- A God exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in ones’ life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.⁵

It is unknown which sheep called the convention that day on the grassy slope. The sheep who was the sociologist spoke up first. She had studied sheep’s actual behavior. She noticed how they wandered off in their individual directions intent more than anything on being individuals rather than on where they together ended up. They believed in this

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149, 136.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-3.

freedom to wander utterly. They believed that nothing influenced them. They were what they made of themselves in the fields and the rocks. One by one they would go, often ending up alone without the faintest idea where they were. They each did their best to content themselves with whatever food was within reach of the next step. They believed there was some order to it all, but also that it was most likely irrelevant to their daily lives. And they observed that it was good to be nice.

At the sheep convention that day on the hill they adopted a resolution that concluded that,

repentance, love of neighbor, social justice, unmerited grace, self-discipline, humility, the costs of discipleship, dying to self, the sovereignty of God, personal holiness, the struggles of sanctification, glorifying God in suffering, hungering for righteousness

just did not figure in the life of sheep as they determined it to be. If they were going to make something of themselves it would be without any of these distracting notions.

When one of them suggested that they had a shepherd, there was much baa-ing of derision. The notion that they had a shepherd to whom they had to answer, who claimed them back when they wandered off, that they *followed* the shepherd, I mean, this was the first century in the common era. That such authority was needed, much less wanted, seemed quaint, sentimental, . . . pastoral.

Now imagine how *really* good and noble a shepherd of *this* flock would need to be. It would indeed be a good, or as the Greek more subtly suggests, a *noble* shepherd who would “lay down his life” for sheep like these. Sheep are not known for being cooperative or smart. They don’t even know what they need. Even a more *realistic* shepherd might see the situation differently.

The good news today is that it is for the likes of these that the shepherd has a staff, wields significant power to call, discipline, rescue, bring back . . . and eventually die for these sheep. Amen.