

Homily for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Times

July 21-22, 2018

Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2: 13-18; Mark 6:30-34

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Several years ago, when we lived out on the edge of town, I got it into my head that I'd like to have a miniature sheep. My long-suffering husband was kind enough not to point out that it was a crazy idea (or maybe he had just given up by then). We found Liam on the internet.

A miniature Southdown, Liam was funny and friendly, and would eat out of your hand. We quickly learned that sheep are unhappy alone and should be kept in pairs. So back to the internet I went and found a cheap sheep companion for Liam, a farmer's leftover that a woman had gotten as a freebie along with some goats she'd bought. She'd described him as "skittish around people" over the phone. When we went to the farm to pick him up we discovered that that was a bit of an understatement. As we approached he ran to the back of his stall terrified. His eyes rolled back in his head from fear as he tried to climb the wall to get away.

We brought him home and dubbed him Gus. Day after day we sat at his stall and handfed him until he was calm. After weeks of patience, low voices, and no sudden movements, he became accustomed to people. In a few more months we reached the point that if you walked into the backyard and called his name, Gus would come running to rub up against your leg as if he were a big shaggy dog.

For many reasons the sheep-keeping at our house couldn't last. When our shepherding came to an end, Liam was adopted by an avid 4-H club and Gus went to a home out in the country. A few weeks later we got an e-mail from Gus' owner thanking us for his new best friend. The man thought he was getting livestock and instead was delighted to find a companion who followed him around and wanted constantly to be by his side (as long as there was tender grass nearby to nibble). A friend who came when he was called.

Our Gospel today tells us that Jesus' heart was "moved with pity" for the vast crowd before him, "for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them."

I wonder what he would say about us.

Sheep without a shepherd are easily frightened, like Gus. They startle. They bolt. They run headlong into danger. They can't do what they are meant to do, graze in peace and safety.

So much of the trouble we encounter in our everyday comings and goings right now is a result of fear: the polarized political climate, building a wall to keep out people who seem different from us, caging children because the fear-mongers have convinced enough of us that we are in danger from "the other." Especially in the United States, despite what the news seems to be telling us, statistics show that we are safer now than we have ever been.

If we let the world shepherd us, we are the scattered flock of today's reading from Jeremiah who fear and tremble and are driven away. When we let Jesus shepherd us, we become the flock of the 23rd Psalm who, even through real danger and darkness, walk in peace and safety.

These weeks of Ordinary time in the church year are our chance to let Jesus once again become our teacher, be our good shepherd. If we listen to his voice—instead of the divisive voices of fear and hate—if we follow him, those gifts we hear about in today's readings become ours.

When we follow Jesus, when we learn from his teaching, we will become the people who build peace. Rather than listening to the voices that spread fear or being the ones dividing people into "us" and "them," we can be the ones who bring unity. Paul tells us about Jesus in the second reading, "For he is our peace, he...broke down the dividing wall of enmity."

If you are feeling distressed at the state of the world, draw near to your shepherd, listen to him, learn from him.