

Sermons at Saint Mark's

The Reverend David Mesenbring

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 13, 2008

Acts 2:42-47; I Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Sheep-smarts

One wise elder and statesman of the Church told me this week that the problem with the Good Shepherd gospel we just heard is that too many preachers think it's about them! But it's not; it's about Jesus. For the record, let me assure you that I don't want to sleep out in the rain with smelly animals, fighting off hungry wolves; much less be martyred on a cross. One way preachers get seduced into thinking we're the focus of this story is by who flocks to hear our voice. But if we observe the traffic patterns of American Christianity, and observe how people flock to one voice and another, we might well ask ourselves whether people are smarter than sheep? The contemporary theologian, Will Willamon, recommends we judge preaching not only by what's said, but also by what gets done in the wake of what's said. So be careful the next time you feel like telling me it was a good sermon; I might just ask what you're going to do about it! It's what we do based on what we've heard said – in the scriptures and from the pulpit alike – that makes the difference.

So are sheep smarter than us? The original hearers of Jesus' words knew a lot more about sheep than do we modern city-dwellers. They knew that all sheep of a village gathered into the same fold every night and were guarded by a single gatekeeper who stood watch until morning. Then one shepherd after another came calling for his or her sheep, expecting sheep to recognize the voice of each one's particular shepherd, and to follow that shepherd out to pasture.

Yesterday, the Dalai Lama referenced our world's growing interdependence saying it's become in our best interest to care for the needs of all other life on the planet. He called this "wise selfishness," as opposed to "foolish selfishness." Maybe sheep are smarter than people who cling to voices that make us feel good about ourselves, instead of the wiser voices that call to

us on behalf of the interests of all life. Sheep know the voice of the one who represents their best interests.

The best voice I've heard in a long time belongs to Katherine Jefferts-Schori, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. She was in town to speak at yesterday's big conference on the environment that many of you attended. If you were there, I hope you'll be sharing what you learned with the rest of us. Bishop Katherine flew in a few days early to hold some other meetings including one for conversation among clergy of the Diocese. That began with her telling us that the Latin root of the word conversation is "converso" which means "to turn about with." She said the term entered the English lexicon about 1300 A.D. and existed there for several hundred years *before* it began to include anything about words! 'Turning about with' one another has roots deeper than merely sharing words. We influence one another by spending time together and "hanging out" in ways more profound than words alone can effect.

Bishop Katherine called on churches to help larger society have more effective conversation. Among the challenges involved, she mentioned how electronic communication technologies have led us to expect information instantly. I couldn't help thinking about our congregation's 'community conversation' two weeks ago in the wake of the Dean's resignation. Many were upset that more information was not immediately available. Since then, I've watched your vestry - made up, by the way, of volunteers who each have a major day job – work to draft and discuss and redraft a document they issued just last Wednesday called "Factual Background of Dean Robert Taylor's Resignation." Some now say this is what they've been waiting for, while others want still more. Our expectation that all information can or should be

immediately available is making conversation difficult.

Another difficulty cited by Bishop Katherine has to do with how we start. "Begin conversation," she suggested, "with a sense of our beloved-ness in God's eyes, instead of our sinfulness. Both are true, but it matters what the order is." Focusing on our sinful nature, we're usually more articulate about each other's sins than our own. This separates us from one another. But the opposite happens when we listen first to the voice spoken immediately after Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased." Bishop Katherine led your clergy through a spiritual practice that would be good for us to share together sometime. Beginning to "turn about with one another" by focusing on our common beloved-ness would likely have different results than focusing immediately on the sinful ways we disappoint one another.

Our clergy conversation with this 'good shepherd' of the church pointed toward larger interests. One priest asked about the national church and Bishop Katherine replied "It's not a national church" and then listed some of our 16 countries. Referencing the current state of affairs in the Anglican Communion, I was struck again by how her description of its macrocosm matches our microcosm of conflict here at Saint Mark's. By her count, five primates (i.e., archbishops) on one end of the spectrum "don't want to have tea with us" but have a growing diversity of opinion in their provinces. On the other end of the spectrum is a larger group who basically agree with our vision of an inclusive table welcoming all God's children. In between these two poles is the largest group of all: leaders tired of talking about sex while so many are dying from hunger and unsafe water and access to micro-credit. This group, she said, longs for more relationship with us. When asked what they want from such a relationship, Bishop Katherine stated that some want money while have some things they want to teach us. Would it be 'wise selfishness for us to engage them?'

Hear again the beautiful words of today's lesson from Acts: *Those who had been baptized devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those*

who were being saved. 'Sounds to me like they were 'turning about with' one another in a holistic way!

At a dynamic - if fearsome - moment in the life of this God-beloved congregation, will we turn about with one another using ancient and life-giving spiritual practices that share word and sacrament together? In so doing, we can turn about with the whole world in a way that would compel the attention of this least-church-going part of the country. We can become a beacon on the hill by being together diversely! It'll be painful at times, as it is even now. We'll need both open ears *and* hearts. But if we do it, it can make true in unprecedented ways that last sentence of today's gospel where Jesus says: *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*

If we turn about with the world then our truths will work to convert some, and their truths will turn us about, too. There is probably no single issue about which more of the world agrees with each other and disagrees with us than the issue of U.S. policy toward Israel. When Israel grabbed illegal control of Palestinian territory 40 years ago, Christians numbered 18% of the total population in Israel/Palestine. Today, that number is 2% and in rapid decline. Unless something is done quickly, we may soon wake up to find no more Christians left in the Holy Land! That's why an ecumenical coalition of Puget Sound Christians will convene the Living Stones Conference (www.livingstonesconference.org) in Seattle's U-District later this week. Will Saint Mark's be as well represented there as it was in yesterday's conference on the environment, or this weekend's events with the Dalai Lama?

What conversations, what 'turning about with' are you called to? By the end of Thursday's meeting with the Presiding Bishop everyone was enthralled with Bishop Katherine so one priest asked "What can we do to support you?" She paused for a long and thoughtful moment before saying: "Exercise your leadership where God has planted you."

So what 'turning about with' can grow from where you are planted to be, and might yet do?