

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalms 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6

Ephesians 2:13-18

Mark 6:30-34

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Our scripture readings promise that God is going to chase away the bad shepherds who have been harming his flock, and then he is going to take over the job himself. The Lord himself will be our shepherd. If we're sometimes less than inspired by this news, it's not because we prefer to be led by some other shepherd than Jesus. Rather, it's because we don't want a shepherd at all. In fact, we don't want to be sheep. I saw a T-shirt once that featured a particularly vacuous-looking cartoon sheep, and the caption: "I'm Easily Led." I doubt the T-shirt sold very well. We don't like to see ourselves as meek and timid creatures, lacking direction and motivation, who need to be herded from place to place for our own good. The shepherd exerts authority, control, management and even ownership over the sheep. We hesitate to allow anyone this kind of power over us.

When the scriptures were written, the world was a very different place. Ancient societies were rigidly hierarchical. Virtually everyone had a master -- someone who lorded it over them. When Jesus said no one can have *two* masters, his hearers all assumed that everyone must have *one* master. It's only in relatively modern times that the ideal has become to be our *own* masters -- to bow to no one.

But however valid this is as a political ideal, it is a terrible mistake to apply it to our relationship with God. After all, like a shepherd, Christ

has chosen each one of us. By his passion and death, he bought our freedom. He calls us by name, makes us his own, and delights in caring for us. He has every right to say, "I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep." But it's not just that Christ *deserves* to be our shepherd. It's that we *need* him to be our shepherd. We human beings *do* have some sheep-like characteristics: there is our tendency to go along with the crowd even when our conscience tells us the crowd is wrong. We can be fearful and timid, stubborn and perverse. But I'm speaking about something even more fundamental.

Let me change images. It's been a long time since my high school Biology class, but if I remember correctly, it takes no physical effort to inhale. A vacuum exists in our lungs, and all we need to do is open them, and air rushes in. The effort comes when we exhale. We force the air out of our lungs and recreate the vacuum. Sometimes a naughty child who hasn't gotten its way will say, "I'm going to hold my breath till I die." But, of course, that's impossible. If we refuse to breathe, we faint, and the air rushes in of its own accord.

Something similar happens in our spiritual life. We were made in God's image. That means we were made to love God. There is an emptiness in us that God is meant to fill. If we insist on a spurious independence -- if we try to be free agents -- we are a bit like willful children holding our breath. Eventually, something is going to rush in to fill that void. If not God, then something less worthy. We will serve someone or something: it might be power, wealth, fame, pleasure, even Facebook or the Home Shopping Network -- some grand obsession, addiction or ideology, or a hodgepodge of lesser things. Whatever it is, it will ultimately prove inadequate and unsatisfying.

Remember in Chapter 12 of Matthew when Jesus is talking to the Pharisees about casting out evil spirits? He says that when an unclean spirit has gone out of someone it wanders around for a while, but then decides to go back to the house from which it came. “And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits even more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first.”

We have to serve somebody. We will serve somebody. By our celebration of the Eucharist today we make our choice of whom we will serve. We will serve Christ. We will be led by the Good Shepherd. There is nothing we shall want.