

Rev. Scott C. Schantzenbach

ASSISTANT TO THE BISHOP ~ STEWARDSHIP SPECIALIST

NEW JERSEY SYNOD, EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA



Stewardship Sermon Starters
4th Sunday of Easter
May 07, 2006
John 10:11-18

This past week I have been contemplating my perceptions and assumptions that have often led to unfortunate conclusions.

- Most auto accidents happen within 5 miles of home...possibly the trip to the church is statistically the most dangerous trip you take.
- Senior and teen-aged citizens have more discretionary money than any other portions of our population.

Maybe the ancient Israelites recognized this persistent self-deceptive tendency more clearly than other societies. Hebrew culture unflinchingly characterized itself as “sheep”. One of the Old Testament prophets, Isaiah, wrote that all of us are like sheep. He didn't mean that we look like sheep, talk like sheep or walk like sheep - we're not like that at all. He wrote, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Is. 53.6a).

One of the reasons sheep so desperately need a Good Shepherd is that after centuries of domesticated herd life, they have lost the instincts that they once used to defend themselves. When a wolf, coyote, or dog gets into the flock, a sheep is incapable of mounting a reasonable defense, singly or as a group.

For 21st century post modern “sheep” that attitude presents a problem. We don't like to think of ourselves as dependent on anyone or anything else for protection. We want to be cowboys, not sheep. When danger and challenge comes knocking, it is not our nature to stand back and let a protector answer for us. This independence is reflected in the way in which we manage the resources that God has entrusted into our hands. Fear causes us to cling to all that we have. Our distorted stewardship reflects self reliance and fear of scarcity. We falter in our recognition of the shepherd's voice and we fail to trust in the abundance of the shepherds care and strength.

Good stewardship practice and the cultivation of a generous heart lead us back to the affirmation of our proper role as sheep which belong to the Good Shepherd. Where our treasure is, that is where our heart resides. Generous sharing feels like risky behavior in a cowboy culture. But it is in that risk that our relationship with God is confirmed.

The movie "Cast Away" portrays our need for relationship. The scene just before Tom Hanks is rescued from his raft shows the dilemma of whether he should risk his life to save "Wilson" (his only friend - a volleyball). God risked his own Son on the cross so that we would know of his great love for the world. Our stewardship becomes a reflection of the shepherd's love and care that enriches our life and provides for our every need.

"I am the good shepherd", says Jesus, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." It is in the generosity, compassion, and sacrificial love of the Good Shepherd that we find our confidence. Our hearts are opened and our fear is dispelled. Faith in the Shepherd emboldens our generosity and ability to act for the sake of the world.