Wendy

"Beat My Sheep"

"An Editorial"
In a conversation Jesus Christ was having with one of his disciples, Simon Peter, Jesus repeated the phrase "Feed my sheep." You can read the full story in John 21. Evidently Jesus felt that Simon Peter didn't understand the full point or implication of what he was trying to get across to Peter.

In John 21:15, Jesus uses the phrase "Feed my lambs." In verse 16, Jesus rephrases his statement and suggests, "Take care of my sheep." Then in a last gasp attempt to get his point across, Jesus states, "Feed my sheep."

"Feed my sheep." Not "Beat my sheep."

From where I sit, I see people in the church being beaten every day, and some who simply cannot take the spiritual abuse any longer and unfortunately decide to leave the church. This act of "beating" Christ's "sheep" leaves me grieving, weary and disappointed.

Some are "beaten" because of their sexual orientation. Some because they were born a woman. Some because of what they choose to wear. Some because of their difference of opinion, or choice of Bible version they like to read, or their ethnic background or culture and preference in style of worship. On my first day at a new church I now pastor, I was "beaten" for placing two candles and having the nerve to light them, on a table in front of the church. In my last position at a church I once pastored, I was "beaten" for having the nerve to suggest that all should be invited to become members of the church, despite who or what they were. The list goes on and on. If you've been "beaten" you know what I mean, for once you have been beaten, you never forget.

I am not a theologian. I am just a pastor of a church located in Greenwich Village, New York City, and having studied pastoral care and counseling over the past three years, I am growing tired of the "beatings" and head games people play in faith traditions of all types. I am perhaps more importantly, just a person with my own burdens and in need of a loving Savior who is more than willing to "feed" my soul and not "beat me."

Some of you may know, that my education, background and career is in advertising. Having had the privilege to have worked for some of the best advertising agencies in New York City, one thing they all had in common was the notion to respect the client, and at all times be understanding of the clients needs and unique characteristics.

The "church" would do well to learn these important advertising concepts, and at least learn the more important teachings of Jesus Christ when it comes to the "client needs" of their flock, better known to us via Jesus as "sheep." In my daily conversations with individuals who I meet with, I know that each one has their own personal and emotional needs and the reality that all of their lives are very complex. Faith traditions would like to put all kinds of people in a little neat box and make them all believe and act in the same way. Fortunately, not everyone is the same. Jesus knew that, and it would seem to me that many church members do not understand this.

One early religious system had it so wrong, that Jesus Christ, God, had to come down to earth to straighten all of us out, on what was important.

Let me share with you some thoughts that you may not fully agree with, but I feel need to be shared.

Jesus never said "Beat my sheep," but it seems to me that those who enter a faith tradition to find sacred strength and spiritual support are often "beaten" instead of fed,
nourished and cared for, or even more important, understood and left to the Spirit to guide them on their faith journey, on their own schedule, not the dogmatic schedule that many faith traditions would like them to be on.

Jesus knew that every individual is delicate, and that his or her varying lives are so complex that special care must always be taken in dealing with each individual. Christ's emphasis was on "Feed my sheep."

There is something fundamentally wrong in the way some faith traditions, including so-called "Fundamentalist" groups, beat each other up with doctrinal dogma, that leaves the people who Jesus called "his sheep," bloodied and bruised. Who in their right minds would want to stay in a sheepfold with other sheep like individuals who are really carnivorous creatures who at first glance look like sheep? In reality may not even know that they are actually wolves.

Life is hard enough without some deranged, well-meaning individual always trying to tell others how they should live, how they should behave, what others should wear, and of course, what kind of music one should listen to. Is a person "lost" because they like the Beatles and another person likes Chopin? I think not.

Just this past weekend, at our worship service in the West Village of New York City, we were having a nice time of reflection on what Christmas memories some of our guests in the sanctuary had. One woman reflected on how she had wonderful memories of her father, now deceased, was always happy and made the family joyful with his talents and gift of bringing that joy to each member of the family at Christmas.

Another member reflected of how she remembered how when her sister was born around the time of Christmas, that this new addition to the family reminded her that this "must have been what Jesus looked like at his birth." It was a great memory, this woman shared from when she was a child, perhaps some 60 plus years ago.

The microphone was then handed to a person sitting in the very last pew of the church. The shadows, as it were. The inspiring testimonies of other speakers where now to be interrupted with a lecture on how "pagan" Christmas was as a holiday. The speaker, then chided our church to get educated on just how "pagan" the holiday was.

I later found out that this individual was a member or follower of one of the most rightwing belief systems where its members feel that they are right about everything and everyone else is wrong. You know the types who think they have a direct link to God. I am not sure what God, but a god. This particular fundamentalist group is known as "The Shepherds Rod," and they use their so called "rods" I suspect, to beat sheep mercilessly with their dogmatic notions. Since I was a young man, I met them on occasion, and they always seem angry about something. On this day, the individual seemed angry about Christmas. How can you be angry about Christmas?

I did my best to go over some historical context and suggest that of course we all knew that December 25 was not the actual date of Christ's birth, but it was a great time of year to turn our attention to Jesus Christ, as the world reflects on his birth. December 25 is the wrong day, but what a great opportunity to share the love of Jesus with others. The music at this time of year is also fantastic.

Earlier in the week, I had met with a person who wanted to be baptized and inquired if it was okay if he continued to drink coffee. "Coffee"? I won't even get into this question here, or my answer but it seems to me, with all that Christ offers to a person, "coffee" is the least of the important matters that should be on a persons mind. Yes, as odd as it might
seem to you who may be reading this, I actually baptize people who drink "coffee." This was and is a sincere individual who is on a faith journey and wants to follow Jesus. Unfortunately someone put in his head that in order to be "perfect" and ready to join this particular faith tradition, some things just had to go.

People "beat sheep" instead of leaving them alone to be lead in their own time by God. God did not offer a checklist of does and don'ts, he offered himself to be our salvation. Our only salvation.

What legalism does to any faith tradition, is to train people to look at each other and be a critic on what others do, what they wear and if a certain style of worship music is acceptable or not. Some "Fundamentalist" groups even try to kill a young girl who wants to have an education. Really sick thinking, but that is another story.

I remember being criticized one morning as I entered my church because I was wearing jeans. I pointed out to the misguided person that if she hadn't noticed, there was eight inches of snow on the ground, and where I live you wear jeans and boots when you have to plough your driveway with a tractor to get to church. I know God didn't mind me wearing "jeans" when I preached that morning, sorry if anyone else did.

I often tell the story of when I was in art school and contemplating going into the ministry at the age of 19 to further my education, I had shared this thought with a minister who was living in the same building as I was. I was shocked to hear him tell me, that "God would never call a person like me to the ministry, since I was blind in one of my eyes, and God would not want a person who was blemished to the ministry." This is the kind of silly misguided nonsense that comes out of the mouths of nut jobs. Sorry, but that is Brooklyn speak for "idiots." It is amazing that I am still in the church. I keep my one good eye firmly focused on Jesus.

We wonder why people, especially young people run away from such a church or faith tradition as fast as their healthy legs and minds can take them. We need to learn to leave people alone. Let people be cared for, and not "beaten" by things that are of no concern to onlookers, since we all do not really know what is going on in other people's lives. One crazy comment can push someone over the edge and out the door. Believe me something like drinking "coffee" or wearing "jeans" to a church service is the least of the problems people have.

Another person I know started to take some Yoga lessons for their health, and was told, I am sure by a well meaning person, that "Yoga" was "Satanic." Oh really? "Satanic"? Making a statement like that is not only shortsighted, but without merit. Suddenly deep breathing and exercise is "Satanic"? Some, I am sure, are well meaning in their comments, but perhaps it is best to remain silent until one really understands the impact of what one is saying. My own wonderful Jewish physician once recommended to me that I borrow a practice of deep breathing from Yoga to calm my stress. I was told to "be careful" when I first started this practice. Deep breathing comes in very handy in many of the encounters I have with people, and helps me to remain calm.

Prayer is of course essential to ones daily walk with God. It is especially essential when one is attacked by a person who is approaching with a rod.
"Feed my sheep." Not "Beat my sheep."

What is so frustrating in pastoral ministry is that while many of us are trying to show compassion and understanding to individuals with real needs and life threatening concerns, others are poisoning individuals walk with Jesus.

This has been going on for centuries in the church, and early church history can point out that beatings, racks and torture were used by the "church" to get people to fall in line with the prevailing "wisdom" of the religious order of things.

Perhaps Christ method of love, respect and gentle caring can be tried to soften the burdens people carry, and when they come to church for refreshment and understanding they can feel the gentle touch of the Savior in our conversations with each other.

There is so much more to say on this very subject, so many people who would happily join the church if the church would understand their need for compassion, the compassion that Jesus offers.

God bless you this week. May God feed you with love and compassion and may we all be able to discern when to speak and when to be silent and let the Spirit move.

"Feed my sheep."

Oh yes, and before I forget: "Merry Christmas."

Best regards - Tony Romeo / REACH-NYC

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