

Do you like being told you're stupid? I don't. I don't like it when someone calls me stupid, implies that I'm stupid, or acts like I'm stupid. I suspect that you don't, either.

There have been times (many, many times, really) when I've acted like I was stupid. More times than I can count, I've looked back on whatever it was I just did and thought "man, that was stupid. What was I thinking?" I suspect that, if you're honest with yourself, you have, too.

Honesty is tough, though. No one likes to admit that they're stupid, even just to themselves.

Collectively, it's even worse. In groups, we often act against our own best interest. We refuse to think long-term. As I said on Good Friday, we engage in an unfortunate amount of group-think and mob mentality. On the other side of the spectrum, we think everyone should think like we do and refuse to try to understand from someone else's perspective. We think our group is good and right and that everyone who isn't in our group is bad, wrong, and stupid...

Countries can be stupid, or just the people who run them, because when most people get even a little bit of power, prestige, or influence, well... they find a way to get even more stupid. And if you're thinking about someone in particular, remember: it's easy to judge when you're not the one making the decisions.

I used to think we were always inventing new ways to be stupid, but now, I mostly think it's all just variations on a theme. Perhaps the stupidest thing we all do on a regular basis is repeating our mistakes.

I could keep going on about how stupid we all are, but I think you get the idea.

Uplifting, isn't it?

And yet, when Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd, that's what he's saying. He's saying that he's Good Shepherd and we're all his sheep. And sheep, dear Church, are stupid. Some folks write to defend sheep, but if you've ever seen a sheep dog work (and I have, because I married a knitter), you know that the dog does its job by being a TON smarter than the sheep.

(As an aside, I don't like the sheepdog analogy. It's not supported by Jesus' words, and it doesn't ring true with what Lutherans believe. There's Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and we're all his sheep. In this fold, there are no sheep dogs. Just sheep and the Good Shepherd.)

Sheep are stupid. And in the case of the Flock that is the Church, well, our Shepherd isn't real bright, either. Why would I say that, you ask? Well, because if the shepherd dies, the sheep are lost. They can't fend for themselves. They can't guide themselves. They can't even groom themselves, as I mentioned in the children's sermon, Shrek the Sheep was in pretty bad sheep when he got separated from his

shepherd because he was almost overcome by his own wool. Sheep need the shepherd. And yet, the Good Shepherd dies for his sheep.

But why??? If the shepherd is dead, there will be no one to care for the sheep!!!

Which is why Jesus goes out of his way several other times in the Gospel according to John to assure his disciples that he will not leave them alone. But that's a sermon for another time...

Because in today we hear Jesus say that he will lay down his life for his sheep and then he will take it up again. He will die, yes, and he will rise again. And in dying and rising, the sheep will not have to fear death anymore. Because just as the Good Shepherd dies and rises, so will his sheep die and rise again.

What does it mean to lay down a life? For God, self-sacrifice is a part of who he is. The Father gave up his only son. Jesus gave up his life for us and died in a terrible way for us. In this, God shows us the depth of his love.

This kind of self-sacrifice applies to us as well; or, as 1 John puts it, "We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." We say this like its extraordinary, and in a way, it is. We don't do it very often. But it's not the stuff of heroes. It's the stuff of all Christians.

Sometimes it's about being willing to die for one another physically, yes. But I've come to the conclusion that being dead is a lot easier than being alive. Laying down our lives is really any time when we put others first. Any time we put aside the normal human inclination to live for ourselves, and instead follow God's command to live for others, we lay down our lives.

Sometimes, we do this for "our own" – our children, those we know and love, etc. But how often do we do it for complete strangers, or even those we actively dislike and who actively dislike us?

That's what Jesus does. Not just for his own people, or those who are loyal to him, or agree with him, or who stand by him in his darkest hour. Instead, Jesus lays down his life for all his sheep, despite our stupid we are.

Like sheep, we are stupid. In spite of our stupidity, Jesus cares for us and loves us. So much, of course, that this crazy Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. And calls his followers – calls us – to do the same.

Amen.