

Why Did the Lemmings Run? Romans 12:1-10

Have you noticed how someone with a terrible idea can so easily enlist other people for their cause? Most of us are law-abiding citizens and yet I catch myself keeping up with the traffic, even if the flow is above the speed limit. We sometimes hear a bit of gossip and feel the need to share it.

The naturalist John Muir wrote in his journal in the wilderness of Yosemite, “*A sheep can hardly be called an animal; an entire flock is required to make one foolish individual.*” Even St. Paul understands our dilemma, writing “*Bad company ruins good morals* (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Information Cascade theory is a part of mathematics that basically states people who are with others making bad decisions will also make the same mistakes, even when they know better. Like the flu, bad choices are spreadable. Information Cascade theory says that if you are in a group that makes bad choices, the likelihood of you being stampeded to go along with fools is fairly good.

We see the truth of this by remembering our history. World War II displays America’s hysteria in the herding of Japanese Americans into detention centers and the loss of their worldly possessions. The horrific event of 9/11 was manipulated by some to get Americans to believe Iraq was a nation of terrorists with nuclear weapons. It could be true that the sky is falling but most of the time it is simply Chicken Little.

This theory offers an answer to a question my mother regularly asked me: “*Wayne, If your friends jumped off the bridge, will you jump too?*” is yes! In St. Paul’s letter to the Romans, he answers, “NO!”

First century believers in Rome were continually pressured to be like the culture in which they lived. Hebrew believers urged non-Hebrews to comply with Roman cultural beliefs. Roman citizens lived in a ‘class’ society structured around

polar opposites: slaves and free; rich and poor; female and male. Roman believers were trying to compel everyone to live according to these morays.

St. Paul encourages all believers to treat one another the same and to respect the uniqueness of each other. One thing this apostle does in his writing is to encourage readers to examine themselves so that they may not fall prey to pride. (12:3)

If he were alive today St. Paul would warn us against giving in to the Information Cascade theory. We are challenged not to live our lives according to our culture or the mindset of our society. Rather, we are exhorted to allow God to transform us so that we might know God's perfect will. (12:2)

By running with God we are enabled to know who we are. We have a correct understanding of how much God loves us and how dependent we are on God's grace. Jesus is shown to be a perfect example of this in the epistle to the church at Philippi. Jesus did not believe that equality with God gave him certain rights which he could hold over people. Instead, he had a correct understanding of who he was, an obedient servant of God.

The disciplines of philosophy and psychology show us that human beings are individuals, but where the rubber meets the road, in politics, in advertising, and other areas of our lives, peer pressure prevails. This force often compels us to conform and this pressure is difficult to dodge.

This should not be surprising to us in the world but in church it is also possible to feel this pressure to conform. One of the beautiful things St. Paul teaches is that the body of Christ is diverse. There are all kinds of Christian practices that are acceptable and that is just fine with God. Paul chose the Jewish cultural practices but he insists that people who accept the Gospel be shown respect for their cultural practices. He even challenged St. Peter when he bowed to peer pressure.

Originally, the term 'fundamentalist' meant someone who believed the orthodox, the basic truths, of our faith. In our current church culture 'fundamentalist' has come to mean those who believe the same way they do, who vote the way they do, who love the same music and speak the same language; and anyone who doesn't is wrong.

In today's epistle lesson the apostle shows that the body of Christ, the church, is composed of many different gifts, and he utilizes a word that is translated in English, 'member,' because the word really means different parts rather than parts that are the same. All of these listed gifts are necessary for a healthy church.

The identification of this variety within God's church is what St. Paul identifies as our 'spiritual worship.' If we do not accept and agree with God's provision for all kinds of people, then we cannot really be God's people, because God is all about relationships.

This grace of difference, granted to us, and granted through us to each other, is one way to define the church, and without it, we cannot be God's people.

Not only is everyone accepted in God but everyone is needed too. Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors. We welcome everyone as they are because we are formed by God's design. We view each other, not as the world does, but as God sees us.

It is not the Information Cascade theory that drives us. Rather, it is the tidal wave of love that floods the church and finds a place and a people who love, accept, and forgive one another. Alleluia. Amen.