

Fr. Jim Willing Gospel Study - The Good Shepherd

Gospel: John 10:11-18

Jesus said:

"I am the good shepherd.

A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

A hired man, who is not a shepherd

and whose sheep are not his own,

sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away,

and the wolf catches and scatters them.

This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd,

and I know mine and mine know me,

just as the Father knows me and I know the Father;

and I will lay down my life for the sheep.

I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.

These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice,

and there will be one flock, one shepherd.

This is why the Father loves me,

because I lay down my life in order to take it up again.

No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own.

I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.

This command I have received from my Father."

Gospel Study: *The Good Shepherd*

We hear in Isaiah Chapter 40 "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock and gathers the lambs in his arms. Holding them carefully close to his heart; leading them home." Isn't that a tender and beautiful passage? We are probably most familiar with one of the favorite Psalms that is ever known, Psalm 23. "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want."

In the New Testament there also are references to sheep and shepherd. The most famous probably is the parable Jesus tells of the lost lamb and the shepherd who leaves the 99 on the hillside in search of that lost lamb and when he finds it, he places it on his shoulders in jubilation. It is such a beautiful image of the Lord's love for each one of us; so personal, so intimate. We hear again Jesus praying in great sadness over the people of Israel when he says, crying out from the depths of his heart, "They are like sheep without a shepherd." Sheep without a shepherd would be totally lost, not to mention maybe even famished.

It is not surprising that Jesus would call upon the great tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, calling forth this image of shepherd, and even more would be understandable given that in the Palestinian setting, which was a very pastoral setting, where the shepherd figures very prominently as one of the main occupations of this rural people, that Jesus would call upon this tender image of shepherd to describe his tender and devoted love for his people.

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We hear at the beginning of this Gospel today Jesus saying, "I am the good Shepherd." He then goes on to give what I suggest are three descriptions of his shepherding love and care for his people. The first says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." John, in this particular Gospel passage devotes 4 of the 8 verses to this refrain: *giving of one's life*. This is the greatest sign of love, "Greater love than this no one has than lay down his life for his friends."

It would not have been uncommon to have heard of a Palestinian shepherd in those days who would die in the line of duty guarding his sheep against the attack of wolves or worse still, robbers who come to steal and if they came across the shepherd may even go to battle with him. Of course that would be far beyond the call of duty, but nevertheless it would not be uncommon for a shepherd to risk their life in defense of their flock. Certainly Jesus is highlighting this point to be the most important description of his love for his people and the willingness to sacrifice himself, which of course Jesus did.

This is sacrificial love that is the greatest sign of love stands in stark contrast to other shepherds of his day who were, in Jesus words, hired hands, "the hired hand who is shepherd catches sight of the wolf coming and runs away leaving the sheep to be snatched and scattered by the wolf because they work for pay and have no concern for the sheep. Obviously Jesus is describing a type a shepherd back then who considered little the sheep and more himself in the way he understood his occupation. Clearly this is seen as an analogy for reflecting on the early Christian community and it is a great sign to us in the church today because the flock of Christ continues to be under attack from both inside and outside.

Inside, we suffer from poor pastors who are uncaring and unfaithful in their service to their people. Pastor is a Latin word for *shepherd*. We have plenty of examples of pastors who, I think, are uncaring. No matter how much we like to think that the pastor alone doesn't make much of a difference, but what I observe is, if you have a poor pastor you usually have a struggling parish.

We wish it wouldn't be that way but that's what I observe and the church really suffers and struggles because of poor pastors; poor priests; poor examples of faithful and loving service. That's not only how the church suffers, the church suffers today from outside forces that I also believe are attacking the church and hurting the people today. I think immediately of a recent example this week (but I won't name any names), of someone in the media who has directly attacked the church, I think in a most destructive, not a constructive way, in a most disrespectful and not in any kind of respectful dialogue. I think this deeply hurts the church. It causes tremendous confusion and consternation in the people.

All I can think of is that like the early Christian community that was under persecution so today, to some degree, we are under attack most prominently in the media. Would that it were not, but I would point out, as I did earlier at Mass today, that this is how the early Christian community grew. When we're under persecution, somehow, something inside of us is called to the front:

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stronger faith; clearer witness; more accountability in our ministry. I'd like to think that this will be the outgrowth of the difficult time that we're under now.

The second characteristic of a good shepherd: the good shepherd knows his sheep. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me." He says that four times in the two verses. To know, in the biblical sense, is to live in intimate communion with someone. In fact, shepherds in the time of Christ lived with the flock. A shepherd didn't have a day off; where would the sheep go? He lived with his sheep day and night so they came to know each other as well as we would know our own pet. Some people tell me they share their bed with their pet, I can't believe it, but you know they seem to treat them as if they're one of the family.

In fact that's how a shepherd would have sometimes regarded the sheep, almost as if they're one of the family. They would come to know them so intimately, so well, that they would oftentimes have a name for each individual lamb. Likewise the lamb would come to know the master's voice so well that when he called, like a pet dog, they would respond to the master's voice. This familiarity bred the most intimate relationship of shepherd to sheep. Jesus is drawing on this wonderful analogy to say, "That's how I know my own and my own know me." That's how he wanted his disciples and followers to come to know him intimately. It's the most beautiful part of the Lord's love for us, that we do not have this long distance relationship but we would feel so close to Jesus as to be one of his own and that we would know everything about the Lord as the Lord truly knows everything about us.

This truly is another powerful lesson for us who try to be about the nurturing profession. Even recently I was reading in the trouble that many of our communities are experiencing with crime that one of the best ways that our police have learned to combat crime is by spending more time walking the beat in the community so that as they allow themselves to get to know the people and the people to get to know them it just fosters this greater sense of peace and order in that community. Isn't that interesting; would that we learn this lesson of the good Shepherd.

Thirdly and finally, the point Jesus highlights in this Gospel passage of the Good Shepherd that characterizes his shepherding and nurturing care of his people is this sense of universality of the entire community. This is the nature of God's love to be indiscriminating. He says, 'I have their sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must lead them too and they shall hear my voice.' We don't really know for sure who these other sheep are that are not of this fold but one can only imagine that John the evangelist is writing to his community to describe those other people who are not of their Christian community, particularly the Gentile people, or the pagan people whom the Lord also loves and obviously would lay down his life for them as well.

I would just point out that this is no small point to be made because realize that Jesus is saying this to a predominantly--in fact entirely Jewish audience--and remember the Jewish people believed they were the chosen people and that means everyone else is not. It was an exclusive club of God that they prided themselves in. I would suggest it's the hardest lesson for most human beings to unlearn is exclusivity. When one group considers itself to be a privileged class

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it's very difficult to get them to share that privilege with others. We see all kinds of examples of that even amongst ourselves. Need I say that as Catholics we once taught that we were the one and only true church in which people would find salvation even though to be Catholic means to be universal.

Jesus prays, "There shall be one flock, then one shepherd. Notice the future tense: "There shall be." That's why I say this is Jesus praying as he prayed at the Last Supper: "Lord that they all may be one in us." Jesus doesn't know the difference, I don't think, from the Presbyterian or Baptists are Episcopalian. All people are God's people, right?

I was humored by a story of a friend of mine who works as a tour guide here at the Cathedral. She told me just last week she was leading a Baptist group through the Cathedral and they were marveling about the beauty of our cathedral and sharing about our faith and the tour guide was eager to share: "I was once a Baptist. I have a great appreciation for your tradition but I converted to Catholicism." And then one of the Baptists spoke up and said: "I was once a Catholic..." That just goes to show, we have a lot to share with each other and what does it mean to be a convert?

I suggest the best meaning of the word convert is to become like Christ. The only denominational name tag we would ever wear is that truly of a Christian. The name tag is not what we say we are but what our actions say we are. This is certainly the lesson that Jesus is wanting to share with his flock that recalls us to not only be faithful sheep but also shepherds ourselves to ourselves and to one another.

As I was reflecting and studying on this Gospel, I couldn't help but ask myself the question: "I wonder if Jesus came and stood before us today and as he often spoke in parables and beautiful images, I wonder what image he would use today to describe the same kind of shepherding love and care for his people?" What profession or career or person or symbol would you think he would draw on? I propose this answer that I came to in my reflection. I believe Jesus today would speak about being a good parent.

Just a couple weeks ago I had the wonderful opportunity of making a retreat at Gethsemane and during this time I couldn't help but be inspired. First of all it was just the beginning of spring you and I couldn't help but be inspired by walking among the woods and all of nature as the trees are budding and flowers are blossoming I couldn't help but be inspired with this Easter season we are in but that is not what inspired me most during the retreat.

Naturally I couldn't help but be inspired by the faithful and devoted monks. I joined them in prayer as they would come to the chapel seven times a day beginning at 3 AM--which I might add, I never joined them then. Seven times a day they would come and seeing these men who

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gave up everything in their life to live a life of very strict penance and continual prayer, I couldn't help but be deeply inspired by them but that is not who inspired me the most.

The person that inspired me the most is this young mother who came one night to *Compline* which was night prayer. She came carrying her infant child in her arms--she couldn't have been more than just a few months old--and struggle behind was her terrible three some little daughter. She proceeded to sit in front of me and entertain me completely. Of course the beautiful infant was just a picture of comfort and security in her mother's arms.

It touched me to just imagine myself trying to be as that child would be in the arms of our God whom we could call father, mother, model parent. Even more so, this little three-year-old who sat for 30 seconds in the pew and then began to explore as she just had to do. First she went underneath the pews, crawling over people's feet and then she was throwing something down the length of the pew, chasing it and bringing it back. Then she decided to go up and check the action up front by going into different pews.

What amazed me is that all the while this mother seemed to be praying. Of course I don't know what she was praying but every so often it seemed to me that she opened her eye and with the mighty index finger--completely in remote control of her daughter--sent her back and she would whisper these secret instructions in her ear--which I wish I could just hear. Her daughter would get the lesson and be still for another 30 seconds and then back to the exploration.

This went on and on and on and what struck me is this great image of how God loves us and deals with us. Like a shepherd, his love is so tender on the one hand, but tough on the other hand. Certainly it's the shepherding skill to discipline the sheep just as a perfect parent would surely discipline their child, lest they run wild and nearly kill themselves and others.

I was fascinated to see with this three year old how she is just beginning to take on some of the features of her mother--especially in her face--and to see how in some ways we are truly made in the image and likeness of God. Yet that likeness needs to be built--just as her character is being built to become even more like her mother--so that we become more like our God. What struck me absolutely most is what a mother or father sacrifices. I've heard so many stories over the years and I think it is the closest to the Gospel story I know of what parents endure and do for their children; they give up so much of themselves.

For instance I know someone who gives up their vacation so that they can provide their children with the best education; sending their children to good Catholic schools or universities. Our parents who serve their kids without ever mentioning how many diapers and dishes and loads of laundry and meals and force themselves to go to work that isn't such a pleasant experience day after day, week after week, year after year. Talk about a shepherding care, to provide the very best and leading them to greener pastures; wanting for their child to have more than what they ever had. Isn't that the reflection of Jesus' love?

I think not only of parents, but of those who are parenting their own parents today; caring for their parent as the parent gets older and becomes dependent on the child. It's like the roles are

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reversed. They have the opportunity to return the favor. It never ceases to inspire me. I really believe that parenting is a lot like shepherding. Yes, there are good parents and bad parents like there are good shepherds and bad shepherds, but what we hear unfortunately are the exceptional cases. We need to honor the majority of people, like the ones I see before me today. You've taught me. You've shown me what it means to love.

When I sat in that chapel, behind that mother, I knew that this was the best meditation I had all week on God's love. I am not at all unlike that three-year-old and she is not at all unlike sheep you know. It's the nature of sheep to be both stubborn and on the other hand timid and frightened. It's the nature sheep to learn slowly and to follow the crowd. It's in the nature of sheep to wander away, but then come back. And that is the nature of a child.

No matter how old we are do we ever outgrow that? Yet God loves us just as we are. Like a perfect parent he just loves us so much he wants us to become our best and so he's always wanting us to grow, to become more, to do better. That's a shepherds love.

This Sunday I'm going to honor parent Sunday. I know it isn't Mother's Day and it isn't Father's Day, but in my mind it's where I discover the Lord's love best of all. Most importantly of all, if we a child to that, then I think of how we need to allow ourselves to be loved by the Lord. I only wish to end with this thought that could we allow God to be such a perfect parent to us and to teach us that greatest vocation in life to parent others. Amen.