

Good Shepherd Sunday 2018
04/22/18

Today is traditionally called Good Shepherd Sunday because, regardless of the liturgical cycle we're in, whether year A, B or C, the Gospel reading is always about shepherds. But before I speak about shepherds, let me pass along a story from Fr. Joe Robinson.

It seems two ladies from New York had always lived a pretty sheltered life. One day they decided to take a trip to England. While they were touring the countryside, the one said to the other, "Look at those white cows. I've never seen cows like that before." The other replied, "Maybe they are albino. Or perhaps a special British type of cow." The guy sitting behind them said: "those aren't cows – they're sheep."

Speaking of shepherds. If you're like me, the first shepherd I think of is Pope Francis, the chief shepherd of our Catholic Church. I would then tend to consider our local Archbishop, since he is seen as the shepherd of the Archdiocese, our local church. And I know some of you think that, as pastor, I am the shepherd of the parish of St. Pat's and I appreciate that title. But regardless of who comes to mind, I would hope that the word "good" is in front of the word shepherd.

However, one commentator suggested a much broader definition. He agrees that every leader of the Church is called to be a good shepherd; but that's not all. He suggests that every disciple who has been entrusted with the precious gift of faith is called to be a good shepherd of that gift. He reminds us we are told that, at the cross, John took Mary into his home. And then he says we are all called to devote that same care and concern to the heritage of faith we receive from Jesus.

In the Gospel, John uses the image of a shepherd to explain what it means to be a faith community. It is about our shared trust in Christ who put His life on the line to take care of His flock and keep them secure. It is about a flock that can be open and welcoming to others without fear for its safety, because the one who laid down His life for them has taken it up again as the Father commanded.

But I want you to know I also have a problem with the idea that Jesus puts forth. Remember how He spoke of the importance of the one lost sheep, how a shepherd would abandon the 99 to search for the one? That would lead us to believe each of us is so important God treats each of us as though we were the only ones in the flock, so important that when we stray, God leaves the rest in search of us.

Well, now we have Jesus telling us He will lay down His life for us. What good is a dead shepherd? Now, not only are the 99 left on their own, so is the one who was lost in the first place. But we must remember Jesus says that's precisely why the father loves Him, because He will lay down His life for His flock, for us. He loves us that much. As one author suggests, true leaders will not seek their own well-being but the well-being of those entrusted to their care.

Recall with me the story of Solomon and the two women. Each claimed an infant was hers. To help him decide which woman was telling the truth, Solomon said the baby should be cut in two, giving half to each woman. When the real mother cried out to stop the guard's sword, Solomon knew which woman was the true mother. A mother's love proved stronger than the family tie. Real love is always willing to sacrifice anything for the sake of the beloved.

Jesus' words concerning the Good Shepherd make it clear that laying down our life for others is in fact the path to fullness of life for us as well. Jesus was willing to lay down His life for us but He also takes it up again. And in doing that, He takes up the lives of all those who have laid down their lives for others.

Though giving up our lives may seem like a remote possibility, think about the instances we are given. The parent who is up late at night with a sick child. The supervisor who stays at the office late to tweak the budget or foregoes a bonus so an employee is not laid off. Each of those, and many more, are instances where a person dies to self for the sake of the other. God will always be placing these opportunities before us. How we react is up to us.