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When we were children, one single proclamation was all that was needed to bring a definitive end to any debate about what should be done or to answer any child's whining question, "Why?" That statement was simply: "Because I am Mother." Mom's declaration communicated a degree of authority that required no further explanation.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes seven famous statements beginning with the words "I am." Each of them reflects something said about God in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet, of them all, Jesus' statement "I am the good shepherd" is the only one in which he describes himself with a human role. When Jesus spoke of himself as bread, light, resurrection, etc., those descriptions indicated what he offers humankind. When he said, "I am the good shepherd," he moved into the realm of his own costly freedom and his mutual relationships with his Father and his followers.

When Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd he is telling us a lot more than the typical picture that we might perceive of him amid the flock or with a lamb on his shoulders. First of all, in today's selection we hear Jesus repeat five times that he lays down his life for his sheep. Each time this is stated, he emphasizes the fact that it is his choice to do so. He doesn't just risk his life or even lose his life, he says he lays it down: His entire life is for them. Except for blessing the bread as his body given for his own, Jesus never explained his dedication to his flock more clearly. In this, he is not only the model shepherd, but the model human being who has discovered the purpose of his life and chooses to fulfill it without reservation.

Sandwiched in the midst of his five statements in which he offers his life for his own, Jesus describes the heart of his relationship with them saying, "I know mine and mine know me." Explaining the depth of what he means, Jesus compares his relationship with his own to his relationship with his Father. That sort of knowing involves an intimate sharing of life and of such love that the parties come to understand each other from the inside, becoming freely and inextricably bound to one another. Jesus explains that he has chosen to have an insider's knowledge of his own and offers the same to them.

Before anyone makes a claim to the exclusivity of their tribe or flock's participation in God's love, Jesus says that he has other sheep in other folds who share the same relationship with him. When he says that they will follow and all will become one flock, he is giving a subtle but pointed warning to any who would try to set the boundary lines. He tells people who pride themselves on being his own — both in his day and in ours — that he is the shepherd. Membership in his flock depends only on hearing and following his voice; it can't be defined by rituals or formal membership in any

special group.

When Jesus said “I am the good shepherd,” he used the language of his tradition to proclaim not only that he had freely chosen the course of his life, but also that he was a faithful reflection of God, the Father of all. His self-description as the good shepherd summarizes Christian theology; it tells us the purpose of creation and the Incarnation was to bring all into one in God.

Where does this leave us? How are we to determine which voices speak for the shepherd? How are we to discern who is leading us toward God? That’s where Jesus’ description of mercenaries and wolves comes in. The hired herder’s first concern is personal comfort and safety — we might see prestige and profit as additional expressions of that. Mercenaries consistently choose themselves and their own kind, seemingly unwilling or unable to accept or comprehend the concept of one flock composed of diverse folds.

The wolves, too, are recognizable by their priorities. They specialize in fear and division. They possess the powers of strength and stealth and prey on the weak. While a relationship with the good shepherd is characterized by ever-increasing knowing and being known, wolves specialize in lies and disguise (as Little Red Riding Hood would tell us) all for the purpose of eating up their victims.

Many voices claim to tell us what should be done and why. Jesus claimed the authority of being the Good Shepherd who gave everything to bring humanity to the goal of sharing divine life.

We can always recognize his voice in those that call us into love and freedom and ever-broader solidarity. If we ask “Why?” his simple answer might be, “Because you are mine.”

ACTS 4:8-12

Last week, we heard how Peter preached when people flocked around him after he had healed a lame man. Now we pick up the story after Peter and John have been arrested for Peter’s homily attributing the miracle to the power of the risen Christ. Peter takes full advantage of the ridiculousness of the situation as he addresses the leaders of his people.

Much to the delight of every Christian who heard the story, Peter highlighted the incongruity of being arrested and interrogated for having healed someone. He addressed the religious leaders as if saying, “If healings are a matter of grave concern to you, then you and all the people of Israel should know that this person was saved from his sorry fate in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean. You remember who that is, right? He’s the one you had crucified. But God had other plans.”

The new Peter had come around to a true imitation of his Master. He no longer marveled at what he thought he himself could accomplish but admitted that what he could offer had nothing to do with his own power. Peter, the man who tried to talk Jesus out of any idea of suffering, now stood up to the very people who put Jesus to death. He was unafraid to point out their folly and proclaim what he had come to understand about Christ.

The most important thing we see in Peter now is that he has become a true disciple; he is following in Jesus’ footsteps and facing the same treatment Jesus received.

From the beginning of their ministry, the early Christian disciples met the same conflict, rejection and danger that Jesus had, but filled with the Holy Spirit they no longer worried about their own status or even their fate.

In this story, Peter offers a prototypical example of genuine discipleship. He freely offered what he had to a person in need. When the crowds marveled at him, he deflected the attention to Christ. When he was brought before the powers of the world, he remained unworried and used even their harassment as an opportunity for evangelization.

Peter repeated what Jesus had taught earlier when quoting Psalm 118 (and referenced in Luke 20:17): “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” Now that phrase refers not only to Jesus, but also to those who proclaim his name. Peter’s faith in Christ and the Resurrection trumps all the visible powers allied against him. In the tradition of the last becoming first, Peter is unafraid of all that may be implied in rejection because he has found Christ as

his rock, his cornerstone.

PSALMS 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

Nothing could be more appropriate as a response to our reading from Acts than Psalm 118 and the refrain celebrating the marvelous reversal God accomplished by making what was rejected the key building block of the new creation. As in weeks past, we sing of God's mercy. Then, fully aware of what happens to faithful evangelizers, we add our conviction that it is better to seek refuge in God than to trust in the ways of the world and its rulers.

The second strophe calls us into a first-person song of praise. If we really want to pray this verse, we should take stock of our life and gratefully remember ways in which God has answered us. To repeat these words without genuine gratitude for our own experience of God's merciful love is like going to the theater and spending our time texting. Even though we happen to be in the right place and pronouncing the right words, inattention and an unengaged heart vitiate the power of our prayer and undermine our faith at least as effectively as does avoiding prayer altogether.

When we come to the third strophe and sing "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," we are reminded of the text of the Sanctus and the invitation it presents to welcome Christ into our life again and again. We could also allow ourselves to pray this line in gratitude for the people who have come into our lives and brought us closer to God. We could use that line as the refrain in a personal litany of the saints who have touched us.

When we have done that, when we have so remembered God's goodness to us through others, we can sing with all our heart: "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his kindness endures forever."

1 JOHN 3:1-2

This short selection from the First Letter of John offers a lifetime supply of material for meditation and thanksgiving.

The first topic it presents for contemplation focuses on the power of the love of God. It echoes John 1:12,13: "To those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God ... born not by natural generation nor by human choice ... but of God." This reminds us that God's love has given us new birth and a new birthright. The most humbling part of that is the realization that we have done and can do nothing to deserve it. We need no bootstraps to pull ourselves up into the realm of God's household. In fact, we are more likely to learn we must take off our shoes as we attempt to comprehend all that God has done and desires to give us.

The next line tells us that the more we become a part of the household of God and allow our self-understanding to be rooted in God's love, the less we will fit into the world around us. Like immigrants whose values may not always coincide with those of their new place of residence, we will feel like strangers and be thought of as oddities. Like Peter before the Sanhedrin in our first reading, our mindset will be unintelligible and even perceived as dangerous by those who do not share it.

The third idea in this reading looks to the future with open-ended wonder, joyfully based on what we already know of God's transforming love. Underlying the statement that we will be like him is the basic human truth that we imitate what we admire. To that end, the more people love one another, the more they share the essence of one another's life. This teaching tells us that as we enter ever more deeply in relationship with God through Christ, we become more and more alive as God's own offspring. But even this is only a foretaste of the grace we will experience when we come into the fullness of knowing Christ face to face. On that day, we will become radiant with his own unimaginable light.

JOHN 10:11-18

Jesus described himself as the good or model shepherd immediately after an altercation with authorities who criticized him for healing a blind man on the Sabbath. At the end of John 9, the Pharisees protested at being called blind. In reply, Jesus asserted that if they were truly blind, they would have no sin, but since they claimed to see correctly, they were guilty of rejecting the truth. Thus, although the discourse about being a good shepherd may seem like an abrupt change of subject, it actually functioned as a commentary on the quality of the leaders or shepherds of Israel in Jesus' day and has

become one of Jesus most memorable and most beloved self-descriptions.

When Jesus talks about the shepherd and sheep, he's obviously going far beyond the interactions between the simple souls whose job was one of the lowliest in society and some of the dumbest animals on the ranch. (Pigs, horses and even cows score far better than sheep who are known to blindly follow one another into oncoming traffic or even off a cliff.) Jesus' imagery refers to traditions like that found in Ezekiel 34 where the prophet critiqued the leaders of Israel for being shepherds so unworthy that God had decided to come in person to replace them. From that tradition, we get the image of the good shepherd as the ideal leader.

The first part of Jesus' contrast between shepherds and hired hands focuses on their motivations. After saying that a good shepherd is willing to give his life for his sheep, Jesus denounces the mercenaries for some very basic reasons. First, he points out that the wage earners are neither shepherds nor owners of the flock; they have neither the expertise nor the vested interest necessary to tend the creatures under their care. As a result, they value their own safety over that of the flock — they may put on a good show in public, but when danger comes, they are the first out the door or up the tree, as the case may be.

After saying that, Jesus reminds people that while the mercenaries simply don't care, the wolf's goal is to harm the sheep. After setting uncommitted pastors to flight, the wolf catches some of the sheep and scatters the rest. The image of being caught by the wolf was all too familiar to John's community at the end of the first century — they knew exactly who their martyrs had been and were well aware that the wolf was not far from the door for many among them. The wolf's work of scattering has also been obvious in every situation of persecution the church has known. Those opposed to Christ's cause have always been adept at using threats to disperse less than wholly committed communities. Of course, the statement about scattering the sheep also calls to mind John 16:32 in which Jesus told his table companions that they would all run, leaving him without human companionship when his hour came.

The crux of Jesus' message is twofold: As the shepherd whose sole desire is to care for the sheep, he shares the essence of his life with them and is willing to give all on their behalf. By tying his role as shepherd to his relationship with the Father, Jesus indicated that his mission as the good shepherd was not simply to care for the sheep, but to make them like himself by bringing them into his relationship with the Father.

Planning: 4th Sunday of Easter

By: Lawrence Mick

This Sunday is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because the Gospels in all three cycles of the Lectionary speak of Christ as a shepherd. This, along with the time of year it usually occurs, also makes it a prime time for celebrating first Communion.

If you do celebrate first Communion today, remember that this is still the Easter season and still part of the period of mystagogy. Easter songs should be prominent and the Easter décor should still be evident. First Communion for children at this point during the season should be linked to the first Communion of the neophytes at the Easter vigil.

This means that the focus should be on belonging to the flock, being more deeply incorporated into the body of Christ, rather than “getting Jesus” for the first time. Eucharist is not something we “get” as much as it is something we do. And the primary effect of what we do at Eucharist is the unity of the body of Christ.

This perspective needs to be part of the catechesis offered to the first communicants and their families. Catechists should help them understand the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity, continually reinforcing our baptismal identity as members of the body of Christ. It should not be hard for the children to understand this, since they are now able to do what the rest of the assembly does — to share in the sacred meal.

Even if you don't celebrate first Communion today, this could be a good day to focus the preaching and catechesis on the mystagogy of the Eucharist. Planners might discuss what insights would be most helpful to the parish to deepen their

understanding and appreciation of this sacrament. Such insights could be suggested to the preachers and/or form the basis for a bulletin insert today.

Planners might focus the petitions for the general intercessions today around the unity to which we are called. Pray for deeper union with Christ, for stronger bonds within the body of Christ, for unity among all people of goodwill, for those who feel they have no place to belong, for those seeking a spiritual home, for those lost in sin or confusion, etc.

Environment for the Easter season: This week brings the church to the midpoint of the 50 days of Easter. How are the Easter flowers holding up? Do some need replacing? It takes good planning to keep festive décor looking good for seven weeks, but it's important to maintain the spirit of the season. Depending on your location, you may be able to draw on parishioners' spring flowers to spruce things up without a large financial outlay. Take notes now for how to spread your resources next year to cover the whole of the season.

Prayers: 4th Sunday of Easter

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

We may sometimes wonder where we “belong” in a world that seems so wrought by division. In today's Gospel, Jesus uses the ancient, but still powerful, image of the good shepherd who knows and protects his flock. Easter celebrates that we have been made one people by his death and resurrection. Baptism and Eucharist intensify our place in this body. Nothing could be more unifying than that.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are the good shepherd willing to give your life for us: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you demonstrated this in your death and resurrection: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you have made us one people, united in your body: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider We pray now for a world that longs for unity.

Minister For the whole church, the body of Christ: that we may be a viable sign of unity among all people ... we pray,

- For unity in a world and within families torn apart by religious, political or economic differences ... we pray,
- For leaders charged with the responsibility of those in their care, whether they be world leaders or those within the church: that they may imitate the example of the Good Shepherd ... we pray,
- For our first communicants and all our parish members: that we may understand the Eucharist as a source of our unity in Christ and with one another ... we pray,
- For a deeper sense of responsibility for the Earth and its environment as we celebrate Earth Day this week ... we pray,
- For our parish ministries that promote unity and love by feeding, embracing, consoling, teaching, assisting and forgiving others; and for those who are served ... we pray,

Presider Loving God, from the beginning of time you have called the human race to be one. Forgive us when we violate or prevent unity, and empower us to seek and strengthen it wherever we can. We ask this in the name of your Son, who died and rose that we might be one. Amen.

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