

Homily for the Fourth Easter Sunday

April 20, 2018

Probably no biblical image of Jesus is so popular and beloved as that of the Good Shepherd. We have all seen images of the good shepherd carrying his lamb on his chest, or guiding his sheep to good pasture. Today's gospel allows us to explore the reasons for this popularity and its implications for us.

The Good Shepherd occurs only in John's gospel:

The image of God as the shepherd of his people occurs in other ancient religions, and in the Old Testament. The reason is that shepherding is the most important role in nomadic peoples. The shepherd is the leader. In small flocks, the shepherd was usually the owner of his sheep. But when the flocks got into the hundreds it was too much for the owner and his sons, and men were hired to shepherd the sheep.

Jesus describes himself as a good shepherd, an owner of his sheep, who prizes them not simply as his wealth, but as his prized possessions. He knows them by name, summons them by name, and so is willing to lay down his life for any one of them. The hireling, by contrast, does not own the sheep, and so does not prize them, may not even identify them by name. They are not his, and when the flock is attacked he has no stake in them and so flees for his life.

The Meaning for us

Jesus is the good shepherd who has laid down his life for his sheep. The chief priests wanted him to ratify their sacrifices and the money they got from exorbitant temple taxes. Jesus purified their temple. The Pharisees wanted him to obey their meticulous interpretations of the law, even when they endangered people's lives. But Jesus healed on the Sabbath, and then reinterpreted their laws in favor of divine compassionate love. And when these wolves came down on the fold he stood fast against them. And so he laid down his life for the vindication of his law of love which is the only way to true justice and world peace.

The second meaning is about us. We live in a culture of hirelings. Few of us own our companies, or other institutions which provide food, clothing, shelter, jobs, and wealth. Many of us hate our jobs, and some of us hate even our companies. We don't want them to fail, because we are dependent on the job, but if another job were available we'd bail in a minute. Working in cubbyholes, we have no commitment to the people we work with or the people we serve.

Many of us do our jobs with the minimum amount of effort---the priest who reads the same homily every year on the 23rd Sunday of Pentecost, the teacher who lectures from the same notes year after year, the politician who goes along with the party line only because he can get money for reelection, those of every job and profession who no longer take pride in their work---"It's good enough for government work."

In contrast, this gospel reminded me of Byron Lynch in the maintenance crew at Seattle University. Byron is approaching 70; he has made good union wages at Seattle University and has a good retirement plan. But he won't quit, because he loves his work and he loves the people he works with. He knows the electrical system in every one of our 50 buildings. He has bought in, he owns the place. And on odd summers he goes to Zambia to help Fr. Bert Otten with his appropriate technology developments in the villages. He owns those places too. And so he metaphorically lays down his life for them. He is not a hireling but a good shepherd.

Brian is a model of the good shepherd which all of us need to be. He loves the flock he serves, he loves the flock with whom he serves, and he loves Jesus who is his Good Shepherd.

Inspired by Jesus, the Good Shepherd, be good shepherds.