

Homily for 4th Sunday Easter/Mother's Day

There is a story that one time a young man worked on a ranch for a summer. A young calf was trapped in some mud and brambles and was now weak and exhausted. They got the baby calf free. The young man had to carry the calf on his shoulders back to the ranch. As he walked, he thought of the biblical image of Jesus the Good shepherd carrying the lamb. And he thought about how this is what Jesus does for us.

And then he felt a warmth, as the now relaxed calf did what all relaxed infants do. The liquid was running all down his front and back. And he thought, "Yes, this is really what Jesus does for us."

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There are thousands of years of people herding sheep. And because of that there are various good and bad shepherding stories. Some of them are negative examples. They are examples of what not to do – or what Jesus is not like. For example:

There is the claim that the one sheep out of a hundred which the shepherd goes back to find is probably the agreed upon price of his services.

There is the story about a driver on a dirt road. He stops because sheep are being herded across the road. One sheep gets left behind. So the shepherd goes across the road. The driver gets out to take a picture of this biblical story come to life. And the shepherd gets behind the sheep and kicks it to get it moving.

There is the reminder, every now and then, that sheep were livestock; they were owned to be used and eaten.

And there is the one about shepherds breaking legs of ornery sheep in order to carry them back to safety. (I am not that fond of this one. The God of "Tough Love" might fit with some events related in the Bible. But normally, God is the one who heals us of injuries caused by others. God is the one who heals us of injuries caused by our own sinfulness.)

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The reality is that all of our analogies about our relationship with God fall short. There will always be people who shy away from speaking of God as a father or mother because they did not have a good relationship with one or both of their parents. There will always be those who have been hurt by the decisions of government officials.

Instead, God is the original and best. And all of our examples will always fall short of showing God's goodness completely. God makes up for the imperfections in our rulers, in our family members, in our teachers and guides. God is the model for parents and kings – and shepherds. Even though none of us fully live up to the calling we have.

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Today we look at one biblical analogy that is used over and over. It is the relationship humans have to sheep. It is used in both the Old and New Testaments to speak of God's relationship to us. And specifically of Christ's relationship to us, for He is the GOOD SHEPHERD.

Sheep are domesticated. They now depend on the shepherd. God made us to be with Him forever. We are made for Him and find our fulfillment and in Him.

Sheep are herd animals. We, made in God's image, are made for relationship. We are made, then, also for each other.

Sheep can be back-biting and scared and wander. We can wander from our true purpose.

God guides. God leads. God knows us. Christ is our Shepherd.

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Last week I mentioned that Our Lord told His disciples that He has one flock. We, then, if we are to remain in Him want to be attached to that one flock. As imperfect as the shepherds are. (By the way, that is not an excuse for bad shepherds.) Christ has come to give life, and give it to the full.

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Every year on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, this “Good Shepherd Sunday,” our reading comes from the tenth chapter of the Gospel According to Saint John. In this Chapter Jesus speaks of Himself as shepherd and sheep gate. This year, we do not get the words “Good Shepherd” in the passage itself.

But we hear of the core elements of that title. Christ knows us. No one can steal us from Him, or the Father. These are words to give us hope.

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We are also told that His sheep hear His voice and follow Him. This is both a fact, and something to work on. Hearing His voice is a fact because, by our belonging to His Church, we know the Holy Spirit resides in us. God speaks to us.

Hearing His voice is something we work on because through our listening to Scripture, proclaiming the Creed, receiving the Sacraments, praying daily, and listening to our Consciences – formed in the Faith – that we grow to recognize His voice.

Good Shepherd Sunday is a time to rejoice in belonging to His flock. He is the Good Shepherd. He came that we might have life, and have it to the full. We are not just livestock. We are His, and He is ours.

And in Him, we have each other.

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My Brothers and Sisters, in case you might get caught up in the analogy that we are sheep, please remember it is one of many images through which God teaches us of our importance, and the importance of relying on Christ.

We are, in Jesus, made children of the Father. We are members of God’s family. We are members of Christ’s Body. The life of the Trinity surrounds and penetrates us. That is how much God loves us.