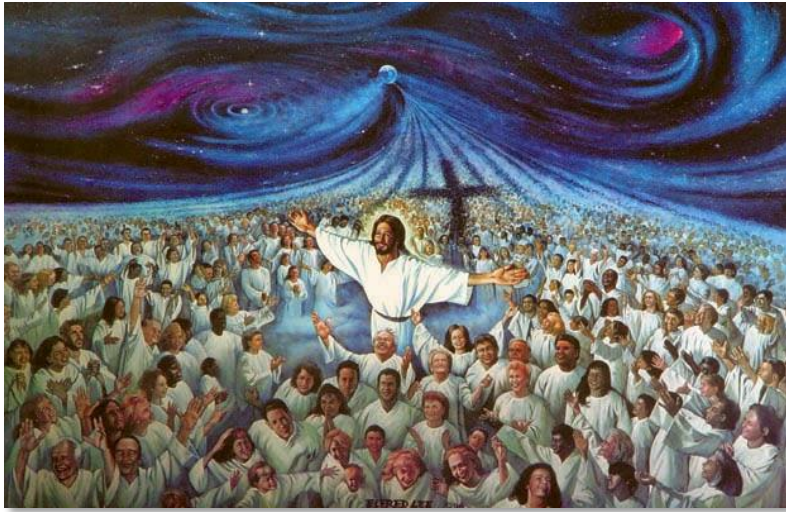


Homily for Sunday, May 8, 2022 – Fourth Sunday of Easter



You've all heard the expression that good things often come in small packages. Well, this gospel passage is short, but it packs a punch. The first line of today's gospel has Jesus saying, **"My sheep know my voice."** You would think the next line should be, "They know me and they follow me." But, it doesn't

say that. Instead, it says, **"I know them, and they follow me."** Gospel writer John is saying that even if we don't know the Shepherd very well—which is the case when we don't take the time to pray and discern well—the Shepherd still knows us. God's desire to know us, to unite with us, to love us is not directly proportional to our desire to know God, to unite with God, and to love God—thank goodness! Personally, I really want to know the One who makes such an effort to know me. In the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, the temple priest, Eli, teaches the child, Samuel, to say, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:9). Unfortunately, much of my prayer—if I can call it prayer—goes more along the lines, "Listen Lord, for your servant is speaking."

Prayer is the only way to truly get to know the One who knows us. 99.9% of prayer, if it's not 100%, is about listening. **"My sheep hear my voice."** Prayer is the way we hear God's voice. Prayer is not about speaking, although I'm sure God is all ears and would never dismiss us with, "I know, I know, I know...I've heard it 7 billion times today already." When we speak, we are mostly hearing ourselves and not telling God something God doesn't already know.

I believe that each generation, including our own, needs to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to us in our own context, that is, in this time and in this place and under these unique circumstances. American theologian and storyteller John Shea says, **"Each generation must discern the voice of Jesus. It doesn't mean**

we throw out all the voices of the past. It's simply a warning that parroting ideas we do not understand will not help our faith development."

I think, we are all hungering for an experience of Jesus—not the historical Jesus many theologians and archeologists like to argue over, but the Risen Jesus who is as much alive here and now as he ever was 2000 years ago. Everyone, who walks through these doors, deep down, hungers for an experience of Jesus, although they would probably not express it that way. If we don't seek out that personal and communal experience of Jesus, we will have precious little to pass on to others. When other peoples' experiences of Jesus, when what we've read in books, or what we've heard in workshop or on retreats—as good as all that is—replaces our own prayers and experience of the Risen One, we become like travel agents handing out brochures to places we've never visited. It's all true, but it's not yet ours.

That's why growing in our faith as adults is infinitely more important than simply assuring our kids get their sacraments. We will be able to take the next generation only as far as we have gone ourselves.

It all comes down to ***knowing*** and allowing ourselves to ***be known*** by the Good Shepherd. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, didn't come for the theologically savvy among us nor for those who were simply looking for self-assurance. He came for the wobbly and weak-kneed, those who know they don't have it all together and are not too proud to accept the handouts of amazing grace.

Don't take advice from a gardener who doesn't have dirt underneath their fingernails or who doesn't have stains on their knees. By the same token, those who have gotten their hands dirty from all that life throws at them, do have something to say to us. Those are the ones with the battle scars; those are the one who have come through life because of God's grace. They are honest enough to admit they didn't do it themselves.

The late Brennan Manning was such a person. He lived as a priest, a husband, a divorced person, a chronic alcoholic, a counsellor, and as a homeless street person. Here's a quote from his book entitled [The Ragamuffin Gospel](#). I don't know the context of everything he mentions in this quote, but it is an honest appraisal of how the Good Shepherd, Jesus, knows us and sustains us with God's grace at every moment of our existence. Here's what Brennan Manning says.

Because salvation is by grace through faith, I believe that among the countless number of people standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands (see Rev. 7-9), I shall see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son. I shall see the woman who had an abortion and is haunted by guilt and remorse but did the best she could faced with the grueling alternatives; the businessman besieged with debt who sold his integrity in a series of desperate transactions; the insecure clergyman addicted to being liked, who never challenged his people from the pulpit and longed for unconditional love; the sexually abused teen molested by his father and now selling his body on the street, who, as he falls asleep each night after his last “trick” whispers the name of the unknown God he learned about in Sunday school; the deathbed convert who for decades had his cake and ate it, broke every law of God and man, wallowed in lust, and raped the earth.

“But how?” we ask.

Then the voice says, “They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

There they are. There we are—the multitude who so wanted to be faithful, who at times got defeated, soiled by life, and bested by trials, wearing the bloodied garments of life’s tribulations, but through it all clung to the faith.

My friends, if this is not good news to you, you have never understood the gospel of grace.

Fr. Phil