

Homily – April 21st, 2024 – Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday)



The gospel story we just heard is a contrast between a true shepherd who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep and a hired hand who runs away when danger comes. It's really not a story about shepherding sheep, which I know nothing about. It's a story about caring for the people God has put on our life's journey. Jesus is the good shepherd not because he talks about some abstract, idealized shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, but because in a concrete way Jesus just does it—he lays down his life for his sheep. Love is never abstract, like a mushy Hallmark card, or a good intention, that we never get around to doing. Love is always concrete. It's about loving this particular child who drives you nuts, this husband who's a couch potato, or this woman who is way too stuck on her own looks.

Jesus puts knowing and loving together. We tend to love what we know over and against what we don't know. ***"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and mine know me."*** That's the key to how Jesus loves; he first takes the time to know. Some of you, parishioners, I don't love. It's not because you are not lovable; it's simply because I haven't taken the time to get to know you.

Six years ago this month (April 6, 2018), you may recall, 16 members of the Humboldt Broncos hockey organization, mostly young hockey players, died tragically when their bus was broadsided by a transport truck that failed to stop at an intersection in Armley, Saskatchewan. 13 others on that same bus were injured, some permanently. I felt for them and their families partly because it happened to fellow Canadians. Shortly after the crash, their names, as well as their ambitions and goals in life, were made known to us. I felt I had an affinity

with them, like I said, simply by the fact that they were Canadian. I saw their pictures, and I knew something about their aspirations in life. However, the next news story was about how 15 people in Pakistan were killed that very same day. This was equally as tragic, but because I knew nothing about them, they registered in my mind as just a number...15 dead in Pakistan. They were nameless people who lived on the other side of the world. Sadly for me, this is a pattern that has repeated itself every time I watch or listen to the news about the homeless, the climbing death count in Gaza, or the depressing statistics surrounding mental health and suicide.

In the eyes of God there are no statistics, no balance sheets, no unknown people, no faceless or nameless people. There are no people known only by the tattoo number given to them in the concentration camp. In the eyes of God nobody is known by their Medicare number, their social insurance number, or by any of the countless passwords that dominate our lives. In its place, is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the one who knows us deeply and personally.

In the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, there is a story about people strutting their pride (bad pride is called "hubris") a little too flamboyantly. They are going to build a tower to reach the heavens on their own. For them, this is going to be the crowning achievement of mankind, and they are going to proudly take credit for it saying, "We did it!" They are building the Tower of Babel. To humble their pride, God confuses their language and, in the confusion of the builders not being able to communicate with each other, the tower never gets completed. That's the Bible story. However, the rabbis like to put their own spin on the story. The rabbis say that the real reason the Tower of Babel crumbled was not because of people's selfish pride. The real reason it failed is because the leaders of the project were more interested in the work than they were in the workers. When a brick would fall to the earth and break, the owners would be upset and lament the loss of the brick. But when a worker fell to the earth out of exhaustion, they just ignored him and got someone else to fill his spot. So, God destroyed the tower not because they were trying to reach heaven, but because they were more interested in the bricks than the bricklayers.

In the same vein, some companies will regularly demote or fire people that they deem as useless pawns in the pursuit of profit. The bottom line for them is what counts; the bricks come before the bricklayers. That is not so with Jesus. We matter to him personally. All people matter to Jesus and not just the productive ones, the Catholic ones, the Christian ones. Jesus, the Good Shepherd says, ***“I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”*** He is the savior of the world, and nobody goes unnoticed or unloved under his watch.

When I take the time to get to know someone, an immediate solidarity emerges in me; I feel a certain oneness, a commonality that wasn't obvious to me previously. I realize that other person has a name, a story, ambitions and drives very similar to my own. They want basically what I want in life: to love and be loved, to feel appreciated. They want security and safety, to forgive and be forgiven. They want joy, a job that's meaningful, and at least one person who cares about how their day went. They want to be comforted when life is challenging and to be challenged when they are not the best version of themselves. While we are all basically the same, we are unique--among the 8 billion people who walk this earth—in God's eyes.

When we take the time to better know each other barriers come down. Prejudices, racism, and rejection give way to understanding and acceptance.

This was an old Navajo sheep farmer, in the American Southwest, whose neighbour's dogs were always killing his sheep. It got so bad that he knew he had to do something. As he saw it, he had three options. One, in true American tradition (Canadian too), he could sue; he could hire a lawyer and take his neighbour to court. His second option was to build a stronger and higher fence so his neighbour's dogs could not get in. But he took the third option. He gave two lambs to his neighbour's children. In due time the lambs grew into sheep and had other sheep. The neighbour and his children got to see the sheep not as an impersonal herd, but as

something warm and fuzzy, something personal with individual traits and a history and names. Soon they penned in their dogs.

Knowing leads us to caring. Jesus, the Good Shepherd is the revelation of God in our midst, God who lets it rain on the crops of the just and the unjust, God who sends sunshine on the good and the evil. The Good Shepherd is the God of the Jews, the Samaritans, and the Gentiles, the God of rejects, lepers, and thieves, the God of you, me, and them, the God who knows all of us by name.

-Fr. Phil