

## Homily for Sunday, April 26, 2026

There is a pattern in this gospel story, a movement you might say. And the pattern seems to go like this. First you follow Jesus, then you find abundant life. The point of following the shepherd, if you see yourself as one of the sheep, is that you



might be led to pastures of abundant food. ***“I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.”*** The movement is not that you first find some kind of abundant life on your own,

you get your finances in order, you smooth out any relationships that need mending, you read some religious books, you go on a retreat, and hopefully—if you have any time left—you set about following Jesus. Jesus seems to be saying the opposite. “Follow me, even if you are unsure, feel unworthy, or have never seen yourself as a risk-taker.”

Why would we do this? The only reason we would leave our comfort zone, the guarded sheepfold, is because we trust the voice calling us forward. If you’re anything like me, you look before you leap. Usually, we entrust ourselves only to people we are sure have our best interest in mind like a spouse, a best friend, a financial adviser, a priest, or a therapist. In my mind, one of the worst crimes out there is the crime of fraud. Fraudsters prey on vulnerable people by first gaining their trust, then like thieves and bandits (to quote the gospel), they move in for the kill. Religion itself can be one of the best places for fraudsters to hide. We

never expect them to be hidden, cloaked in religion itself. Jesus was referring to fraudsters of his time, the Jerusalem priests and Pharisees, when he warned against thieves and bandits.

The gospels themselves tell of stories where Jesus could work no miracles, no good work in certain places. And the reason given was that Jesus could not entrust himself to those people. While trying to remain open to the presence of God in all people I meet, there are some people—including some clergy--I cannot entrust myself to. Like Jesus, I shake the dust off my shoes and move on to others. Whenever any religious institution, religious group, or interpretation identifies itself as the only entrance by which people can access Jesus rather than Jesus himself being the gate, my Spidey senses tell me something is not right. Instead of life in abundance, there will be death and destruction.

So, why would we trust in Jesus' voice among all the other voices vying for our attention? One reason is that he's a man of integrity. To be a man or a woman of integrity means your words and actions are one; they're integrated. At some point Jesus just stopped talking about an idealized shepherd who would lay down his life for his sheep. Instead, he just did it; he laid down his life freely for us. The inner and the outer, in Jesus, were one. Integrity is the opposite of hypocrisy. A hypocrite is always split, never one. Hypocrisy and greed were the two worst sins for Jesus, not sins of the body as most of us were raised to believe.

Besides integrity, I can entrust myself to Jesus' voice because he doesn't just love people in general, he loves in the concrete. Not only does he know each of us by

name, but he's also taken the time to actually know us personally. He loves each of us with our quirks, our idiosyncrasies, our faults, flaws, and our sins. I want to follow a voice that has taken the time to know me through and through and loves all the parts of me even the parts that I struggle to accept and love.

If there's one regret I have in life—and I try to live without regrets—it would be the wasted opportunities where I didn't take the time to get to know a person better. On the flip side, I've never regretted when I did make the effort to do so.

A priest friend of mine, who since passed on, once said, "Phil, when you first start in a new parish, I don't think you really celebrate Communion with them." It was an odd thing to say, so I asked him to explain. He said that while we participate in Communion, we hand over the Body and Blood of Christ to people, it's initially shallow. We don't know a single parishioner by name nor what's going on inside of them. What deepens Communion, he said, is when we take the time to get to know each other, usually over a meal or a cup coffee when no one is in a rush. When you sit with a family and hear the struggles and the joys at the center of their lives, that's the beginning of Communion. When they dared to share something of their lives with you and you shared something of your life with them, a bond of trust and affection is immediately formed. Afterwards, when you look them in the eye in the communion line and say, "The Body of Christ, the Blood of Christ" then the communion becomes real, actualized, and powerful. Before me is the man who shared with me at last night's supper that he wasn't sure how he was going to provide for his family now that the company has gone bankrupt. Here before me, in the communion line, is the teenager who, over a

coffee at Tim Horton's yesterday, told me she just got her driver's license and is savoring her new found freedom. Ah, that's communion. What was objectively true is now subjectively true. It's personal. I think my friend was absolutely right.

Here's a story that might illustrate this point.

***There was an old Indigenous sheep farmer whose neighbor'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 traditions, he could sue; he could bring a lawsuit and bring the neighbor to court. His second option was to build a stronger and higher fence so his neighbor's dogs could not get in. But he took a third option. He gave two lambs to his neighbor's children. In due time the lambs grew up into sheep and had other sheep and then the neighbor 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. They soon penned in their dogs.***

When we stop seeing the differences between us as threats, they actually become an opportunity for communion. But for this to happen, we need to take the time to know each others' names and then dare to know something about each other's story. In that moment, the Risen Christ walks through locked doors, rises calmly from sealed tombs, and thaws what was once ice-cold relationships. It's then that we are on the cusp of life in abundance.

*~Fr. Phil*