

Shepherding All

While reviewing the “Good Shepherd” discourse of Jesus in John 10 the other day, I found myself hearkening back to yesteryear growing up on our little family ranch. Many a frozen morning, Dad sent my brothers and I (grumble, grumble) to chop ice off of water troughs, toss bales of hay and take the count ... to seek the lost lest they be in distress. Yet, especially in winter, every mooing face pleads in anxious anticipation, and their unspoken but evident joy of being fed is all the thanks you need. It is little wonder that so many dedicate themselves to helping desperately poor peoples of the world.

That Gospel also got me thinking of a very early painting of Jesus in the Roman catacombs depicting Jesus carrying an injured lamb on his shoulders. That image—like the many similar ones over 2000 years—touches us deeply, as it reflects God’s tenderness, His compassion, His love for each person. We know that on the shepherd’s shoulders we are carried to a place of care, of security, of good pasture...where there will be nothing I shall want...where He restoreth my soul. (Psalm 23)

But we—like sheep—sometimes foolishly wander from the flock ... from the caring shepherd, lured by attractive yet poisonous weeds ... the stray very often falling prey to that which—those who—would consume him. “Eat, drink and be merry!”, or more contemporarily: “Sex, drugs and rock & roll!” ... until an O.D., or death of AIDS from promiscuity, or robbing relatives for drugs, or dumping the kids on grandparents to raise, behind bars or killing someone by driving drunk. These are all too familiar (and predictable) manifestations of leaving the universally-applicable guidance of the Good Shepherd ... the guidance of Good.

But Jesus is the True and Good Shepherd, and He cares for the flock with the deepest possible love—indeed, with infinite love. To leave God is to leave love.

We Christians believe ALL peoples are God’s children, and thus God seeks to gather ALL into His flock—from north and south, east and west—for St. Paul assures us that God: “...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4) God IS love, and love wants only the good for the beloved.

Thus, the Good Shepherd cannot but guide the flock in Truth and goodness, to healthy pastures of God’s care ... standing between His flock and the wolves. Jesus proved His love by freely giving His very life for the flock, that His flock might truly live, for He prays to the Father: “I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me...” (John 17:24)

A favorite Bible commentator (W. Barclay) relates the story about a French soldier in WWI whose arm was so terribly mangled that it had to be amputated. The surgeon regretted that the soldier would face the rest of his life so maimed, and when the young man awoke said to him: “I am so sorry to have to tell you that you have lost your arm.” But the soldier replied: “Sir, I did not lose it; I gave it freely—for France!”

Infinitely more generously, Jesus sacrificed His life not for a nation, but for the world—for love of us, His flock—so that we might live eternally with God, as He affirms: “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own...” (John 10), and we know that: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

The greatest human vocation, then, is to imitate and emulate Jesus in being good shepherds to those around us, willing to sacrifice time, talent and treasure—and sometimes even our lives—for the good of the flock, especially in the human search for the absolute Good. We are all called to go out to guide all toward the betterment of the world ... to the best good for all and the joy of feeding the starving flock in a world often devoid of beneficial spiritual fodder.

So, O Christian, remember that WE are now the body of Christ acting in the world. WE are now His hands to work, His feet to travel the dusty road, His voice to proclaim His Gospel to the world. WE are given strength and courage through God’s grace to go out to the world to guide others to God’s infinite love ... confident in Christ’s Words: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20) It is WE who are sent forth by grace to reflect His light to all around us—not only to family and friends, but to everyone whom we meet ... especially to all who have yet to come to know Him who is the absolute Good, who is love itself ... apostles sent out to bring others to Christ. The Latin dismissal of the Catholic Mass is “Ite, missa est!”, meaning “Go; you are sent!”... because the Good News—the Gospel—is not private property or secret knowledge, but—like the love it manifests—is meant to be shared.

The very essence of the Christian faith is love of God and neighbor, and there is NO greater love of both God and neighbor than to bring others to Christ. So let us be that spring of grace for others, that they may seek and find the source of grace. Comfort the lonely and the sorrowing ... help those around you in whatever need you may find them ... whether it be physical OR spiritual. Overlook the little pinprick slights and offenses against yourself. Be that light of Christ that He calls us to be ... and then we will be those good and faithful servants called to share our Master’s joy.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep...I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (John 10:11-15)