

The Shepherd who knows his sheep

Homily for 16th Sunday Ordinary Time

July 18

Today's Gospel has a vivid picture of how Jesus sees people who are lost to his love. They are like sheep without a shepherd. Have you ever been saddened by the human condition? This is a wonderful world and each of us is happy to be alive, but have you ever been touched by what some writers have called the "pathos" of humanity? There is something sad and almost pathetic about human beings. For all of our pride, all of our knowledge, all of our sophistication, there are areas of our life in which we are so vulnerable, so uncertain, so insecure.

The heartache of loving and losing . . . fears and insecurities about the future . . . aging and dying . . . the inability to get our act together . . . doing those things we know in our hearts we ought to do and leaving off those that are destructive to us . . . the difficulty in connecting our lives one to another.

I am certain that God sees our condition and has compassion, for we remind Him of sheep without a shepherd.

For example, sheep are particularly prone to wander. The shepherd has to be watchful whenever his sheep are in treacherous terrain, for they will invariably wander off and some of them will get into serious trouble.

There is a shepherd sheep connection to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. You've heard of those ancient scrolls, haven't you? The Dead Sea Scrolls is a large collection of manuscripts . . . many of them copies of Old Testament books . . . which date back to the first century. Before these scrolls were discovered the earliest Old Testament manuscripts could only be dated back to the 10th century. In Biblical scholarship terms it was a hugely significant find.

Do you know how they were found? In the mid-1930s a shepherd boy was looking for lost sheep in a valley near the Dead Sea. The valley wall had many caves and the boy was throwing rocks into the caves to scare out any sheep that were hiding. When he threw a stone into a certain cave he heard a pot smash. On investigation he found hundreds of sealed pots with manuscripts well preserved inside. They became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Isn't that classic? A major archaeological find occurred because sheep are prone to wander off and get lost! Of course, sheep are not the only creatures of God that wander.

Sir Thomas Beecham, British conductor and impresario, was conducting a rehearsal of Handel's *Messiah*. Beecham said to the choir, "When we sing 'All we, like sheep, have gone astray,' might we please have a little more regret and a little less satisfaction?" That's how many lost sheep are today--little regret and totally satisfied.

God sees us as sheep without a shepherd. It saddens Him to see us flounder about with no sense of direction, no sense of purpose, no sense of hope. Sheep are prone to wander.

Sheep are also quite fragile. Sheep are naturally defenseless. They must be watched continually. They need protection at night. Predators continually try to infiltrate the flock to kill the sheep. Sheep are short sighted. They can only see 6 feet ahead.

“No matter how many times you bring wayward sheep back,” says one writer, “they are prone to wander off again because they can’t learn from their mistakes. That’s important because sheep are defenseless and dependent. They don’t have much of a bite . . . no natural defense--no claws, no horns, no fangs . . . not even a stink bag like a skunk. To make matters worse they are top-heavy and their legs are spindly. This makes them slow. Plus they have no camouflage, so when they are being chased by a wolf they are out of luck . . . Sheep are also susceptible to all kinds of diseases . . . they will eat too much if you let them and get sick. They are definitely not your king-of-the-forest types.

“And finally, sheep are easily frightened and confused. It doesn’t take much to scramble the simple mental yolk of a nervous sheep. They’ve even been known to plunge straight over the edge of a high precipice in a panic, one following right after another.” (5) Sheep are fragile and quite vulnerable--like many people.

That is why God sent Christ to be our shepherd. “I am the good shepherd,” Christ says in John 10:14. “I know my sheep and they know me.” This is the Good News for the day. The Creator-God not only looks upon His children with compassion, but He has moved into the world to redeem those who are lost--to become the Shepherd of the sheep. Even more than that, He became the lamb slain for the sins of the world.

A man named Allen C. Emery tells of the night he spent on the Texas plains with a shepherd who was keeping two thousand sheep. The shepherd prepared a bonfire for cooking supper and providing warmth. The sheep dogs lay down near the fire as the stars filled the sky.

Suddenly Emery heard the unmistakable wail of a coyote with an answering call from the other side of the range. The dogs weren’t patrolling at the moment, and the coyotes seemed to know it. Rising quickly, the shepherd tossed some logs on the fire.

When Emery looked out at the sheep he saw thousands of little lights. Emery writes, “I realized that these were reflections of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. In the midst of danger, the sheep were not looking out into the darkness, but were keeping their eyes set toward the shepherd.”

That is what you and I need to do. Keep our eyes set to the shepherd.

In John 10:27 Jesus said that his sheep hear him and follow him and that he knows them. Those

Jesus told a parable in Luke 15 about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. What does he do? He leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes after the lost sheep until he finds it. And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and heads toward home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.” Then Jesus says, “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

What we need to see is that Christ's love is at the same time universal and highly individualized. The good shepherd loves all his sheep while at the same time he loves each individual sheep as if it were the only sheep in the world to love.

The point is that people often wander from the flock. But there is one who is our Good Shepherd--always seeking to rescue us and bring us back into the fold if we will allow Him to. A favorite hymn says it this way,

“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.” (9)

Are you feeling a little lost today? Maybe you feel more than a little lost. The Good Shepherd is here this day seeking to help you find your way. He wants to put you on his shoulders and take you once more to a safe place. Listen closely and you will hear him call your name. Amen.