Homily for Good Shepherd Sunday

S. Stephen’s, Providence

April 25, 2021

*“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us.”*

In the Name of the Living God: +Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Greater love hath no man than this,” Jesus tells us:

“that he lay down his life for his friends.”

We see that theme from John’s Gospel echoed in the letter of John,

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us.”

And in today’s Gospel reading,

we hear, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Jesus’s teaching

on the Good Shepherd, and what makes that Shepherd truly Good.

Of course,

as I mentioned in our weekly e-blast,

our beloved name of “Good Shepherd” Sunday

is in fact a misnomer.

Turn to any biblical commentary on the 10th chapter of John,

and you will almost certainly read

that the translation of the original Greek is a terrible one:

the word that is translated as Good

is in fact best translated as “Model.”

Jesus is the model shepherd.

He is the model shepherd in the sense that is he is

the best and truest image of what a shepherd ought to be.

I would be remiss if I didn’t point out

that all of the earliest images of Jesus in Christian art

are not of the Crucifixion or Resurrection.

Many of the earliest mosaics and paintings in churches and tombs

are of Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

On one hand, no early Christian needed to be visually reminded

of crucifixions, and how awful they were.

On the other hand,

any Christian would have seen the image of the Good Shepherd,

and immediately connected it with the language of sacrifice,

love, and death,

found in John’s Gospel as Jesus talks about

what makes the Good Shepherd… well, Good.

The True, model Shepherd

is made so by his willingness to lay down his life for the sheep –

he will protect them at any cost.

We hear echoes of this in other Gospels

in the parable where out of a hundred sheep,

the Shepherd goes in search of the one lost sheep,

rejoicing when he finds it.

However, I do wonder if the image or metaphor of Shepherd and sheep

is somewhat lost on us today.

Very few of us here have firsthand knowledge of sheepherding,

and we are far removed from the agrarian culture of Jesus’s time.

Perhaps an image that might more quickly resonate with us

is Jesus as the model dog walker, or the model pet owner.

That’s about as close as many of us come these days to life on the farm.

I’ve no children yet,

but I do have two cats and have recently acquired a new puppy.

I’ve had this dog for about two months now –

frankly it seems like two years already,

such is the extent that my life was re-ordered almost instantly,

to revolve around this animal.

Somewhere in the first week or two of having this dog, Grace,

she unexpectedly bolted while on our usual afternoon stroll.

Safely in the backyard area,

I bent down to collect something she had deposited.

(Let the reader/listener understand.)

In the flash of an instant,

she saw a quick path out to Benefit Street,

and I found myself running after her,

watching in horror as she proceeded to run into the street.

I saw the car barreling down Benefit Street in the corner of my eye,

and without even thinking,

stepped out and put myself between that car and little Gracie.

I was far more confident they’d see me before they’d see her,

and even though I was still getting to know this tiny bundle of love,

I knew I would do anything to protect her.

I tell that story not to put myself on a pedestal –

and if my parents are watching online,

Dad, can you please give Mom a paper bag to breathe into,

or a tranquilizer.

Rather, I tell that story because I think we understand the love we have

for our pets,

and of course, it goes without saying,

for our children and our spouses.

We would rather die than see them hurt.

It is the same with God.

God would rather die than see us hurt.

He would rather risk his own injury than continue to watch his beloved

be beset by sin and death.

And so the Good Shepherd comes to our rescue,

and he lays down his life of his own accord,

so that he might lead us into safe pastures.

Or, to tease out the metaphor offered a moment ago,

he leads us away from the danger of oncoming traffic,

back into the safety of the yard and its fence.

Of course, the pasture this Shepherd leads us to

is a pasture of light and life and immortality – eternal joy with God.

This true Shepherd – this good and model Shepherd –

is also a very strange sort of shepherd.

In the same Gospel of John,

Jesus tells his disciples, “Greater love hath no man than this:

that he lay down his life for his friends.”

This Shepherd sees no distinction between himself and his flock,

other than in his role to protect it.

He is one with his Sheep.

The Sheep are his friends.

The sheep are his beloved friends.

Perhaps this helps us understand the intimacy and the connection

between this Shepherd and his sheep.

“I know my own and my own know me,

as the Father knows me and I know the Father,” Jesus tells us.

The Sheep know the voice of this shepherd,

so that when we hear his voice calling us, we may run to him.

And he likewise knows us and loves us.

Is there anything more wonderful and beautiful to sit in enjoyment of?

The simple fact that God in Christ loves us and knows us so intimately?

To delight in knowing and being known?

A God who calls us each by name?

A God who knows what is written on our hearts,

and has claimed us as his own?

If you’re sitting there, asking the question,

“How will we recognize his voice?”

the question is a fair one.

If we didn’t know any better,

we might hear the voice of the hired hand that Jesus describes –

the one who does not truly care for us.

We could mistake that voice as the voice of the Good Shepherd,

and so how are we to know the voice of him

who would lay down his life on our behalf?

Quite simply, we know it by its fruits.

We know it when we see that voice in action.

As St. John tells us,

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us;

and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”

This love is not a theoretical or static thing:

it is active and living.

As St. John goes on to say,

“Little children, let us not love in word or speech

**but in *deed* and in *truth*.**

By this we shall know that we are of the truth …

because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

And this is his commandment,

that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ

and love one another, just as he has commanded us.

All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them.

And by this we know that he abides in us,

by the Spirit which he has given us.”

Put simply,

we will know the voice of the Shepherd

because we will see the results of his love for us in our lives,

and in the lives of those around us.

And because we have been baptized into his fellowship,

and having received the Holy Spirit,

we will have the grace to know him when he calls us each by name.

God is love, Scripture tells us.

God is light, and truth, and peace.

We ascribe to God and to the Lamb many attributes

that we would rightly consider beautiful.

God knows that we are drawn to beauty.

And so it is fitting that the word we translate as Good,

and is better translated as Model,

can also be translated as beautiful.

Jesus is the beautiful shepherd.

There is something about him and about his life and his call to us

that attract us – that draw us in.

His words and his deeds are beautiful,

and so, we are drawn into that beauty,

and called to make our own lives beautiful,

and to dwell in the beauty of holiness, and the holiness of beauty.

It’s part of why we work so hard to make our sacred spaces beautiful,

and why we feel more connected to God in places of beauty,

whether they be this church or somewhere out in nature.

We know the voice of the beautiful shepherd,

and are drawn to it.

We rejoice in the wonder and amazement of being known intimately

by the Shepherd:

he who is the Creator of the Worlds and the Author of Life.

Despite all that enormity and incomprehensible depth,

that same God knows us personally and calls us each by name.

And therein lies the truth and the beauty

of what makes this true and model shepherd so inherently Good:

it lies in the fact that this Shepherd is one of friendship with his sheep.

He is our best friend – lover, parent, guardian, protector –

all of those things.

He is our Shepherd because he will lay down his life for us;

but he does this because he is our friend.

“Greater love hath no man than this:

that he lay down his life for his friends.”

“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.

… For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life,

that I may take it again.”

If you are sitting here this morning and feeling lost,

or identify perhaps more with that one lost sheep among the hundred,

I can promise you this:

he is calling for you by name, and has already found you,

if you will but listen and hear his voice.

In the words of a hymn that will be sung later during communion,

“Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,

but yet in love he sought me;

and on his shoulder gently laid,

and home, rejoicing, brought me.”

Amen.