

Fourth Sunday of Easter (4-25-2021)

When I was still a very young child, my parents took me to boarding school several hundred miles from home. I attended boarding school in first and second grade when I was six and seven years old. And I saw my parents usually only at Christmas time and during summer vacation. As you can imagine, that was a hard and lonely experience for a young child.

It was a Christian boarding school. We went to daily chapel. We said prayers many times a day. And as part of what I did at boarding school, I memorized whole chapters of scripture. John 14. John 15. 1st John 1. Coincidentally, some of those are passages we use during the Easter season. And as we used to say, I learned them by heart, truly by heart. These were words that sank in. Sank into my heart, into my soul, and shaped me.

As a reward for memorizing passages of scripture, I was given a picture. It is a picture that I have taken with me all my life. Everywhere I go. It's a picture of the Good Shepherd. Only this particular scenario is based on the story of the lost sheep that's told in Luke and Matthew, and it shows the shepherd leaning far over on a steep cliff to rescue a little lost lamb that's trapped far down on a ledge. So, it's a different take on the image of the Good Shepherd, and yet it is still very similar to the story told in John today -- the loving shepherd who risks everything for his sheep.

The picture was important to me. It held before my mind's eye the presence of the shepherd, the shepherd who would seek me wherever I went. The shepherd who was with me, who was present with me even when my parents were absent. That same shepherd has guided me my whole life through. Has led me by still waters and taught me to lie down in green pastures. Has set a table before me even in the presence of my enemies, and called me to love those enemies. That shepherd has been present with me even in the valley of the shadow of death. Has been my comfort. And my strength through the hardest times of my life. And so the picture of the Good Shepherd I received when I was six has been very much a truth that has stayed with me and shaped me my whole life long.

And I think that many of you, if you reflect on it, could testify, as I have just done, to the presence of the Shepherd in your lives. Bringing rest and refreshment. Guiding you. Leading you to the places where you need to go, the people you need to meet, offering comfort and protection and strength. Laying down his life in love for you. That image of the shepherd is such a powerful one that speaks, I think, to many people of God's love for us, God's love communicated in a metaphor that makes sense, that's so practical and real world that we understand it.

The reading from 1st John today reminds us that the God who loves us fills us with love that is intended to overflow from our lives to others. And 1st John says, how can God's love remain in anyone who sees a brother or sister in need and doesn't offer help?

Jesus, in his image of the Good Shepherd, says that he has other sheep besides the ones he's talking to right then. And it's a reminder that we are sheep in a very large flock. God has other sheep. God is calling us as sheep to recognize our sibling sheep.

Now as I reflected on the images in these texts, I thought about how readily, when we see a lost animal like a dog or a cat or even a sheep that's wandering around without its owner, we do everything we can to help that animal. We take in the stray cat. We feed the lost dog. We put out ads saying, *I found a dog. Whose dog is it?* And if no one shows up, we often adopt that dog or cat. Brian and I had our beloved cat who died a year and a half ago that we found as a kitten under a car. And I think that many of us have those experiences at some point in our lives of encountering a lost animal. Think about everything you do just instinctively to help out a vulnerable creature.

But how do we respond when we see a lost human? They are all around us. And lostness comes in a great many forms. Sometimes it's people without the world's goods, people who are obviously hungry and cold and without shelter. Sometimes it's people who've been traumatized in other ways. Sometimes it's people who have been traumatized by the church, and who have received such a picture of God as judgmental and hateful that they fled from anything having to do with God, people who have no concept of the loving shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

There are a lot of ways to be a lost human. And how do we respond when we see one? Do we respond with the same compassion and care that we would to a lost cat or dog?

Do we see in this person another member of our flock? What if we are called to be the presence of the Good Shepherd to that person? To be the presence of Divine Love? Because the Good Shepherd calls us to not be solo sheep, but to be in community with a whole flock. We belong to each other. As we belong to the shepherd. Beloved.

“Let us love one another. For love is of God and the one who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love, does not know God. For God is love.”

Amen.