

Apr. 25-26, 2015
Dr. Nancy Ring

4th Sunday of Advent
All Saints Parish
Syracuse, NY

Good Shepherd Sunday

When I began reflecting on the Gospel reading for today, I began to wonder why this Gospel was chosen to be read during the Easter season. I believe it is because the story of the Good Shepherd is a retelling of the Paschal Mystery – the story that tells us that love compelled Jesus to follow his conscience even to the point of death. Isn't that what the good shepherd is ready to do – love the flock even to death? Jesus tells us that He knows his sheep and that His sheep know Him. How do we recognize and follow the Good Shepherd, rather than a hired hand? When our heart calls us to do the things that Jesus did, we know that we are following the Good Shepherd. When we open our hearts to whomever society and culture tells us not worth much – the panhandler, those who choose not to work, the struggling single mother, those with addictions, we are following the Good Shepherd. Love does not mean that we respond to marginalized persons naively, but with genuine love that demands we give of ourselves. Such openness actualizes the Paschal Mystery in our lives.

Earlier in this passage, Jesus refers to Himself as the door through which we must pass if we are to be part of His flock. Doors, as we know, are very symbolic. When we cross a threshold, we enter into a qualitatively new form of living. In the Middle Ages and sometimes today, when a person wanted to enter the monastery, they were often required to stand outside and knock on the door until it was opened to them. We read that sometimes they had to remain outside for a long time to test the depth of their desire. We remember the custom of carrying the bride over the threshold to begin a new form of life. In inviting us through the door of the sheepfold, Jesus invites us to a way of life, a life whose center is the Paschal Mystery, the mystery of serving others – even to the end of our lives. Our ways of serving may change, but the imperative to serve remains until we die. Jesus promises that if we remain faithful to the voice of the Good Shepherd, we will know God, even as He knew God.

Jesus warns us of the false shepherds whose voices are enticing and alluring but who do not have our interests at heart and will lead us astray, will lure us out of the sheepfold of the Good Shepherd. Who are these false shepherds? Where do they lead us? I suppose there are many answers, but one is surely that false shepherds lead us to complacency, to think that things are fine just the way they are. Complacency causes us to avoid challenges of our time and place. The challenges that urge us to service are, for example, the growing ecological crisis. We can no longer think of the earth is just the place we live, but the place with which our destiny is intertwined. In one way, the earth is an extension of ourselves, and its health dictates our health. When the health of the earth is depleted, our health is depleted also. If everyone made just a small gesture toward replenishing the earth, that would be a good start. In that small way, we could take responsibility and acknowledge our relationship with it.

We also hear a lot these days about human trafficking. How depressing to think that some people use other people for profit by degrading them. If, perhaps, we responded by acting toward those with whom we interact as if they had dignity and worth, we could reverse this.

We could list racism and sexism, also. Complacency might lead us to believe that we are no longer plagued by these social sins, but it doesn't take much reading of the newspaper and listening to the news to show us otherwise.

When we cross the threshold of the sheepfold, it is like being baptized: we become a new person in Christ and adopt the legacy Jesus left us – that of service to one another. That service can extend from countering the complacencies of today or simply reminding others of their goodness by a smile or a hug.

It is worth noting, too, that in the reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*, that we heard today, we are told that the “stone the builder rejected has become the cornerstone.” So often those whom we may not notice are those whose innate worth could really teach us something. I always take this to heart because I am afraid that had I lived in the time of Jesus and heard him preach, I may have been one of the scoffers. There at least would have been a battle between my heart that would be resonating with His words and my mind that would be wanting to know with what rabbi He had studied! I’m glad I live now. This reading should at least be taken as a warning not to dismiss the ‘other’ for their way of life too quickly.

And so, on this Good Shepherd Sunday, let us cross the threshold and enter into the challenge of living the mystery of life out of death in our day and age.

Amen