

*Readings*

Acts 4:8-12

Ps 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

1 Jn 3:1-2

Jn 10:11-18

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When you think of sheep and shepherd, what image comes to mind? Perhaps you struggle with the image, particularly if you are not from a farming community. Of course, Jesus uses different images to describe his life with the Father and us. Just the other day (Tuesday and Wednesday of this week), he used the image or metaphor that he is the bread of life (John 6:35). But if you are familiar with the image of the good shepherd, or if you are open to today's gospel, imagine yourself in this scene. Sheep and shepherd are really about relationship. And like any relationship, one has certain hopes and expectations.

Jesus states that he is "the good shepherd," that is, a model shepherd and guardian of our souls. He is clear that a good shepherd lays down his life for the protection and guidance of the sheep. It implies an intimate and personal bond and a willingness to even give his life in watching over the flock. Jesus contrasts that with the bad shepherd. The bad shepherd, or hired shepherd, is an arrangement that is merely utilitarian. When trouble (wolves) arrive, this shepherd flees and is concerned only with themselves and their well being. They don't care for the sheep. They use the sheep to satisfy their own needs, themselves. That is their priority, not the sheep. An example of the good/bad shepherd beyond Jesus are the apostles of Jesus. John was the favorite and expected leader. Peter, on the other hand, was like the hired shepherd who abandoned Christ and the others in the moment of trouble. Yet, he emerges as the leader, the shepherd. There is hope for all of us to be that shepherd we are called to be!

The point of the image is the relationship that Christ has with the Father and what flows from that relationship, the care for others primarily. As followers of Christ we must have the same consequential relationship with the Father as Christ did and place the interests of others before our own. We call that love. This concern for others will also help us to know Christ and be known by him.

We all know that all of us operate with mixed motives at times. That is part of the spiritual journey, to know and purify those motives. Also, the hired hand would unlikely have a relationship with the sheep like the good shepherd ordinarily would. Because of the relationship between the shepherd and the sheep, we would expect a certain tender care to be rendered and manifest.

But Jesus gives us an example of a good shepherd. That is our call to relationship with Christ and through him, with the Father. The good shepherd commits to sacrifice for the sake of others, which of course we understand that Christ has done for us. But we are called to emulate that in our lives. St. Augustine, in his commentary on this gospel, would tell us, “whoever enters the sheepfold (the church), let them enter and preach the true Christ, and not only let him/her preach the true Christ, but also seek Christ’s glory, not their own. By seeking their own glory they have scattered Christ’s sheep instead of gathering them.” That is the challenge we are to consider as we reflect on today’s gospel.

What might be one of the “take aways” from today’s gospel? Well certainly one of them is that the good shepherd is “other oriented,” so devoted to the sheep that he/she is willing to surrender his/her life that the sheep might live. Of course, that is exactly what Christ did and calls us to as his followers. But the image also tells us how important the relationship with the Father is in order to be the good shepherds we are called to be.

Toward the end of the gospel, Jesus notes that he has “other sheep,” that is, other than Israel. It is a reminder that we invite into the sheepfold not just friends or people like us, but all who are open to Christ’s invitation to enter. Some might be concerned that being part of a larger sheepfold they might get lost in the crowd. Again, St. Augustine offers us this thought: “God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.” In other words, not to worry, what is important is our openness to Christ and his message and to share that message with others, and if we are faithful to that, we, too, will be good shepherds.