

The Good Shepherd

In the name of our Good Shepherd, dear friends in Christ: Some time back I read an article by a fellow who was commenting about how through over use and “inflation” the meaning of certain words changes over time. To illustrate, he told a story about his son who was in the first grade. After the first several weeks of school, the boy was showing his father the fruits of his labors there. He kept pulling things out of his little backpack and displaying them, all the while chattering excitedly and obviously bursting with pride in his accomplishments. He had several drawings in crayon, some completed lettering and counting worksheets, and various other projects he had done – each bearing a number of shining, multi-colored, adhesive stars. The father was genuinely pleased, and wishing to encourage his son, he showed great interest and admiration for what the boy was showing him. Finally he said, “I very pleased, Billy. You’re doing such good work.”

The boy suddenly stopped his gleeful presentation. A look of abject misery spread across his face as he stared up at his Father. Tears welled up in the corners of his eyes and his lower lip began to quiver. All at once he dropped everything, spun around, and ran to his room, where he threw himself on the bed crying.

The boy’s father, mystified by this strange behavior, went to investigate. At length, between his son’s gasping sobs and sniffles, he was made to understand that “good” was the worst thing he could have said. It turned out that in an effort to avoid discouraging under achievers, the school had adopted a new way of speaking when it came to student evaluations. “Good” was the lowest rating and really meant “completely unacceptable” – but by using this terminology, no matter how poorly a child performed, he could still think of himself as “good”. If you wanted to say that a student’s work was good and mean it, you had to say, “Marvelous” or “Stupendous” or “Absolutely Fabulous”. So, without intending to, the father had deeply insulted his son’s work. Fortunately, now that he understood his “mistake”, he was able to correct the damage. But isn’t it interesting that despite the school’s very politically correct attempt to avoid discouraging children by using only positive words, the kids could see right through it? They knew the difference between good work and bad regardless of what their teachers called it.

But that’s what happens with word inflation: the value of an adjective like *good* loses its potency and meaning if it becomes customary to apply it to things that aren’t truly good. Now, I’m not exactly sure what you call it when a word like *good* goes the other way and increases in power and meaning – maybe it’s “word recession”, or just understatement – but that is certainly what’s going on in this morning’s Gospel lesson – the opposite of word inflation. There, Jesus calls himself the “Good” Shepherd. And what exactly he means by that is explained as he contrasts his performance of duty with that of a shepherd who is a mere hireling. We see that the latter is little more than a mercenary. He works for a paycheck; that’s all. He couldn’t care less about the sheep. His only interest in them is the money their owner will pay him for tending them. Now, he does the work, as long as it’s not too much trouble; but if the going gets tough or dangerous, you can forget it. When the wolf comes prowling around, the hireling runs for his life and leaves the sheep to fend for themselves – something sheep don’t do too terribly well, and so they are all lost, killed, or scattered.

But to the Good Shepherd, the sheep are something more than just a way to make a living. He knows them and they know him. There’s a relationship between them. He takes

care of them because he cares *for* them. And he is prepared to sacrifice his own life if necessary to defend them from harm. That's what makes him the Good Shepherd.

But it's here that we have to ask, "Isn't that way above and beyond the call of duty even for a *good* shepherd?" I mean, many of you are in farming, and I suppose you'd say you're *good* at what you do. And most of you own or have owned livestock. They're your animals. You're not just hirelings. And sure, you're not going to ignore or abuse the animals: they're your business and livelihood—but how many of you bother to get to know them on a personal level? Do you call them by name? And no, I'm not asking if when you're angry or frustrated with them you *call* them names (or have other choice words to share with them); I'm asking whether you have bothered to assign each one a name that you remember and use when addressing them and that they might respond to. I rather doubt it. And while I'm sure that you take reasonable measures to defend your animals from predators or theft, how many of you would be willing to defend them at the cost of your own life? Which of you would say to your son or daughter, "Look after the hogs or the cattle or the sheep today, and don't let any harm come to them even if it means you have to die defending them"?

That would be absurd, wouldn't it? When all is said and done, they're just dumb animals. They're your property, and they can be replaced if lost. It doesn't make sense to die trying to defend them. We all recognize that a human life is worth far more than the life any animal (well, all of us except a few wackos at PETA anyway). And if it ever comes down to an "it's them or me" situation, even the best farmer is going to say "fare thee well" to the livestock.

And if you're thinking that perhaps way back in biblical times people thought about it differently, that would be wrong. Even good shepherds would never think of dying for their sheep. Quite the contrary, they raised sheep for the express purpose of dying for people. Although they provided wool and milk as well, they were raised primarily for people to eat. But beyond that, in a religious context, they were also raised to be sacrificial animals. Sheep were raised to be sacrificed for sin. They were taken to the temple and killed on behalf of sinful people so that they could be forgiven and live before Lord without fear of his judgment. So both in a secular and spiritual context, no one would ever think of giving up his life to save a sheep.

So when Jesus says this is what the Good Shepherd does, it's clear he's working with a completely different understanding of the word "good" than we are. His use of *good* is the height of understatement. For the shepherd to lay down his life for the sheep is exactly opposite of what is expected. It's extraordinary, phenomenal, astounding behavior, far, far beyond the call of duty. And that's the point that often gets overlooked when we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Understand that it's just a picture. Jesus is not really a shepherd nor are we sheep. But by using this image that is a shocking upset of the natural order of a shepherd sacrificing himself for sheep, Jesus is pointing us to the even greater upset of his Gospel. Elsewhere Jesus said, "There is none good but God." So when he takes the title "Good Shepherd" for himself, he is claiming to be God—and he's saying that he as God is going to show us what it really means to be *good* by laying down his life for us. This is the marvelous message of the Good Shepherd discourse: that the God of creation, who is infinite, all-powerful, and all wise, is going to sacrifice himself for the benefit of his finite, weak, and foolish creatures. It's a truth that should cause us to hold our breaths in wonder – it's the amazing part of amazing grace.

It's echoes what we heard in last week's Epistle reading in which St. John went beyond the sheep and Good Shepherd image to the full extent of this stunning reality when he wrote that we are God's children. And he wanted you to know right away that this is not just a picture or a figure of speech. No, he said, "That is what we are!" *This is the way it really is. We are the*

children of God. You see, there is a chasm between sheep and a shepherd that can never be bridged. They are entirely different creatures without any intrinsic bond or connection. But remember, we were created in the image of God. From the beginning, we shared something with him that is part of who and what he is. He *is* our Father.

And because he is our Father, he is infinitely closer to us than even the best shepherd is to his sheep. The “father” relationship that John proclaims speaks of a tenderness and person-to-person intimacy that is closer than we can imagine. To God, we are not just “one of the flock” or “one of his creatures”. He knows us. He knows us individually. He knows us in far more detail than we can know ourselves. To give us a small glimpse into how well he knows us, we’re told that he has the hairs on our heads numbered; but it means much more than that. He knows our thoughts, hopes, desires – and he is interested in them all because he cares for us.

And you could hear John’s wonder as he marveled over this incomprehensible love that God has for us. In his mind, he was asking with the Psalmist, “What is man that you are mindful of him?” How is it that the Almighty and Eternal God devotes so much of his time and attention to puny, insignificant, and sinful creatures such as ourselves? But he’s got the answer: “We are his children.” By creating us in his image, God shared part of himself with us. And even then, he was planning something even greater to bring us into closer communion. He was planning to become one of us in his Son Jesus Christ. In him, the God-Man, our Father wants to bridge the gap that separates us from him. In Christ, God wants us to know him like he knows us.

And we do know him. How? Just like the sheep know the shepherd: by listening to his voice and feeling his touch. It happened first when you were born – or rather, reborn into his family. In Baptism you heard his voice in the Word and felt his touch in the water. That’s when his laid-down life was applied to you as you were united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. And there he gave you part of himself: he gave you his own Holy Spirit. There too, he gave you the faith to believe the amazing Gospel of his love.

Then, for most of you, as an infant in your mother’s arms, you continued to grow in your knowledge of him. You heard the voice of the Good Shepherd as you sat with the family in the sanctuary and listened to the readings and the hymns and the liturgies, and also in your family’s devotions and prayers. And this process of learning to know him continued through Sunday School, and for many of us Christian Day School. We reached (or will reach) an important milestone in Confirmation, when we publicly confessed him as our Father, and promised to make it our life-long goal to continue to know him better. And we do this through listening to his voice as it’s read from the Holy Scriptures in corporate worship like this, in Bible studies, and in time alone with him in personal devotions. In these ways he leads us to the green pastures where he continues to feed our faith and reveal himself to us so that we can know, understand, and be more like him who is our Father.

That, after all, is the ultimate goal: to grow up to be like him—that’s what children do. Not that we will become gods—we will always be his created children; but we will be far more than we are now. What will that be? I wish I could tell you, but as John said, “*what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*” I also know this: we will be good in the superlative sense that he is good. That is, we will live sacrificially for one another, laying down our lives not unto death, for there won’t be any of that anymore; but rather laying down our lives for one another in selfless service. And that’s something we can begin to do even now, as John says in today’s Epistle, by keeping his command to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and to love one another.

One day that love will be made perfect and complete. One day we too will be *good*; but until then, may we continue to take every opportunity to increase our knowledge, trust, and imitation of him by listening the voice of our Good Shepherd and following him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!