

HOMILY – 4TH SUNDAY IN EASTER “B” 4-22-18

Jesus tells us “I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. I am the good shepherd and I know mine and mine know me.”

Sheep were very important to the life of the people at that time. Raising sheep was a big business, an essential part of economic life in the Middle East. People used sheep for food, clothing and religious sacrifice. The number of sheep he or she had easily measured a person’s wealth. A good shepherd was highly valued because the shepherd could make or break the owner of the flock.

Truly “good shepherds” were called upon to carry on many and important functions. They had to be providers – to provide pasture and water to keep the flock healthy and alive. They had to be leaders and guides. Sheep are utterly incapable of foraging on their own. To appease their insatiable appetite, they had to know when and where to move them and plan their moves to keep the flock from the blazing sun. They had to be a healer and soother – checking his sheep, bathing eyes irritated from sun and dirt, removing brambles from their fleece, taking pebbles from their hooves. They had to be defenders and protectors – in ancient Palestine bears, wolves and leopards roamed the countryside. The shepherds had to be ready to stand up to wild beasts and even potentially to face injury or death. The shepherds had to become a sort of buffer and shield for the sheep. When forced to spend the night in the open field, the shepherds had to search out a cave, gulch, or gully to enclose the sheep. They often lay down across the entrance to act as a buffer or gate. The shepherds also had to have knowledge about the individual sheep. He called them by name and needed to know the idiosyncrasies and personalities of each one.

One can’t help but notice how similar are the responsibilities of parents, grandparents, care providers, teachers and role models. They are also called upon to be nurturers and providers, leaders and guides, healers and soothers, defenders and protectors, ones who know us well, even despite our idiosyncrasies.

I want today to thank all you “good shepherds”. You are true leaders who seek not your own well-being, but the well-being of those entrusted to your care. Like shepherds in the scriptures, you are wonderful examples of laying down your lives for others.

Any parent who has walked the floor in the middle of the night with a sick or fussy baby knows what it means to lay down one’s life. So too, any son or daughter who cares for an aging parent with patience and forbearance knows what it means to lay down one’s life. Any parent who has a rebellious or ungrateful teen and still loves them despite their actions knows what it means to lay down one’s life for another. Any man or woman who works a long day, returns home to prepare a meal, take their children to sporting events, recitals and other activities, they know what it means to lay down their life for others. Any religious education teacher or school teacher knows the challenges of education and perseveres in spite of obstacles. They know what it means to lay down their life for another.

In the season of Easter, we celebrate the power of Jesus to raise to new life all those who, out of love for God and neighbor, die to themselves so that others might have life.

We recall his living example of a good shepherd and we commit ourselves to follow it. Our Church today also asks us to pray for more vocations to the priesthood, diaconate, religious and consecrated life. But we not only should pray for vocations but actually encourage young people to answer that call. Vocations don't just happen, they are encouraged and supported.

Closing Story

A religious education teacher had spent three weeks teaching the Bible story of the Prodigal Son. She wanted to make sure the children understood every important point of the story including the resentful brother, the loving and forgiving father, and so on. And as she was quizzing her class, she came to the question, "Now, children, out of all the characters in the story of the Prodigal Son, who was not at all happy to see the Prodigal Son returning home?"

A little girl's hand went up. "I know, I know!" she shouted. "It was the fatted calf!"