

Easter IV
4/25/2021

GIVING YOURSELF AWAY

Dorothy Day was a twentieth century social activist who combined a deep and traditional Catholic spirituality with a social radicalism. She once wrote, *If you love, you want to give yourself away*. That's a way of saying that to love is to make a sincere gift of self. Jesus says, *I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*.

He contrasts the Good Shepherd with the hired hand who works for money. Jesus isn't in it for the money. His motivation isn't love of money but love for the sheep, love for us. It's been said that it wasn't the nails that held Jesus to the cross but his love for you and me. As the opening prayer reminds us, Jesus is also our brave shepherd.

Strip away all the sentiment and to say, I love you is to say I am willing to suffer for you. Jesus says, I love you, I am willing to suffer for you even unto death—death on a cross. Jesus' death on the cross and his subsequent resurrection, what we call the Paschal Mystery, is the definitive expression of God's love and it's made present to us and here at the Eucharist where we enter into that intense moment of God's love.

Here in the Eucharist we share in the love of the Good Shepherd. Here we grow in who we are and who we are called to be. Here hopefully we hear the voice of the good shepherd and hopefully we respond not out of fear but out of love. Jesus shows us love in action. Jesus shows us mercy in motion. We're called to do the same for Jesus and for everyone.

In St. John's Gospel there are seven "*I am*" sayings of Jesus. Jesus says, *I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the way, the truth and the light*, and next week we will hear Jesus say, *I am the vine*. As with so much of St. John's gospel there's more than what we see at first glance. *I am* is the Hebrew name for God and so when Jesus pronounces these, he's not just saying who he is but who is truly God as well as truly human.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as Good Shepherd Sunday because each year, whatever the gospel may be, we always hear about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We can sentimentalize what the Good Shepherd means but the reality was something different. Being a shepherd wasn't a 9 to 5 job. It meant long hours. It involved living with the sheep and smelling like the sheep. It could be physically demanding. It included spending long hours in the elements. Shepherds probably had few opportunities to bathe. Shepherds were on the edge of society. It was not life within a gold edged holy card. The Good Shepherd is different from the hired hands. There are those who do what they do for money and those who do what they do out of something deeper, out of commitment. All that leads us to ask, "What do I do out of money and what do I do out of a higher commitment?"

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, I humbly ask your prayers for all who exercise leadership in the Church. Please pray that we may always be inspired and guided by the grace and example of Jesus the Good Shepherd and imitate him in the sincere gift of self. On a broader level, it's helpful to remember that each of us in one way or another exercise some authority in our lives and while the Good Shepherd serves as a model for all those in Church leadership, he also serves as a model for all leaders. For example, parents are called to be good shepherds to their children, teachers to their students, coaches to their players, employers to their employees, elected officials to those they are sworn to serve and so forth for many other people.

Good Shepherd Sunday is also World Day of Prayer for Vocations. On this day particularly we pray for an increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious life who will follow the example of the Good Shepherd. In the last ten years, two men from our parish have been ordained priests for our diocese, two others are seminarians studying for our diocese; one woman from our parish has made final vows as a sister and two other parishioners are in formation for religious life.

One of my dreams is to see our parish become a fountain of healthy vocations to the priesthood and religious life that imitate the love of the Good Shepherd. So I ask for your prayers and for your inviting young people to consider God's call in their life. Many years ago, before I was in the seminary, I was walking out of Mass on Sunday at my home parish of St. Thomas More and a woman I knew calmly said, *Joe have you ever thought of being a priest?* Her kind, thoughtful, no pressure comment was something I valued and continue to value today. So please pray and invite.

When I am dying, I want to receive the ministry of a priest before I check out of this life and I think that's what you want as well. Your prayers and your invitation may make the difference of that happening.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. If you love, you want to give yourself away. As his followers, we not only receive his love, we seek to imitate his love in our own lives. With lives of intentional faith, may we all, each in our own way, show forth to others, the loving, generous service of Christ the Good Shepherd.