

Homily: Fourth Sunday of Easter
(May 15, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Due to the readings the Church sets before us, the fourth Sunday of Easter is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”.

It is the gospel reading from John that speaks particularly to the metaphor of Christ as the shepherd and his followers as the sheep. The other readings however, help to make the image fuller by highlighting the realities of what it means to follow the shepherd.

For example Acts describes how the flock organizes itself: they devote themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship – hence one, holy, catholic and *apostolic* Church. They devote themselves to the breaking of bread (the Eucharist) and to the prayers (which became known as the Divine Office – that is the seven daily prayer times). Finally they held all things in common, each receiving only what they needed and not every whim and desire. This is the poverty of sufficiency.

The Psalm holds forth the promise of lush pasture and still waters that mark parts of the journey; a place of refreshment and rest that the Shepherd brings his flock to when life overwhelms them.

What I want to look at a bit more in depth this morning is St. Peter’s letter and what it has to say about the Shepherd and the sheep. A quick scan of the letter reveals that the hinge upon which this shepherd/sheep metaphor hangs is suffering.

Suffering defines their relationship as it defines the Shepherd. He himself has suffered *for* his sheep, he has suffered unjustly, he suffered patiently, and his suffering

serves a purpose. And because the shepherd has suffered, the sheep are called to the same vocation.

Let's look at these aspects of suffering. First and foremost we are told that Jesus, the Good Shepherd willingly laid down his life for the flock. As St. Peter says, "...Christ also suffered for you..." Or as Jesus exclaimed of himself in verse eleven of our gospel reading, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Jesus, by choosing to become incarnate in the flesh created through him; by opting to pitch his tent with the sheep and live as a sheep opts for the realities of life in the flock: The annoyance of the flies of doubt and despair that burrow under the skin of the sheep driving them crazy; the hidden pits and crags that can break a sheep's leg and trap them in fear; the bites from the world's snakes who strike from their holes in the grass as the sheep eat and the bandits and thieves who sneak over the stone wall of the sheepfold to use and abuse the sheep for their own purposes.

Secondly we know that the suffering which the shepherd bore was unjust. Most of our suffering as sheep arises as a result of human sin, the consequences of a broken and unjust world. But the suffering the Shepherd endured came through no fault of his. It was undeserved. He did not sin. He had committed no crime. He had injured no person.

In fact Jesus' actions and his preaching were quite the opposite. He told his sheep to love their enemy and bless those who persecute them. He told them that vengeance belongs to God alone. He instructed them to give to Caesar what was Caesar's, even encouraging them to listen to and pray for those who held secular authority over them since all power is given by God.

Thirdly we know that the shepherd suffered patiently. He held his peace; he remained silent in the face of lies and accusation. He bore the insults and the scourging with love, secure in the hope that was his in the Father. Jesus the Good Shepherd was the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah concerning the Suffering Servant of God when he prophesied, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

When the Shepherd finally does speak upon the cross, the only words our Lord utters about those who crucified him and those who condemned him were words of forgiveness: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Right here we see the ultimate expression of love. It is what someone has called "in spite of" love as opposed to "if" love and "because of" love. "In spite of" love says "I love you for yourself, and this will not change in spite of what you do or don't do or whether you stay the same or change." It is the love that God is when St. John tells us that "God is love."

It means that God is unconditional love. God is totally for each of the children he has created. As Abbot Jerome Kodell says, "God does not love us because of what we have done, nor does he wait to love us until we do what he hopes. He does not withdraw his love when we disappoint him. He loves us completely, unconditionally, in spite of anything we do."

And unconditional love on the model of Christ, expresses itself in unconditional forgiveness. God did not wait for us to repent of our sins before he saved us through the

death of his beloved Son. And that is still true now: God loves us completely even while we are in the act of sinning. From the cross we see God forgiving the inexcusable. We see God forgiving you and me.

Finally, the Scriptures tell us that because the Shepherd has suffered the sheep also will suffer. Because the Shepherd chose to endure hardship, the sheep must also choose to endure and persevere rather than ignore and avoid. The sheep, if they are to follow the Shepherd who alone can bring them to the greater redemption of still waters must walk the path that leads to greater suffering.

Now this doesn't necessarily mean that we should go looking for that which will cause the greatest suffering thinking that the more we have the closer we are to God. What it means is that the Buddhists are correct, "All life is suffering" and we have a choice, we can either choose to spend our energy avoiding it the best we can – a near impossibility and a path leading to tremendous anxiety. Or we can choose to engage it head on with the power of Christ that is ours by faith and grace.

Christ is with us. Christ walks with us. Christ leads us. Therefore we can meet the forces of hurt and injustice with courage, motivated and reassured by the Spirit's promise that the Shepherd will protect us – never asking us to go where he has not prepared and equipped us to be – and that because of the Shepherd's suffering, the pain we are experiencing is not in vain but is in fact redemptive.

It is redemptive not only for us but for all whom we encounter. By following the shepherd we are transformed into bearers of his love; conduits of his unconditional

forgiveness. By the effectual working of the Holy Spirit we become sacraments of Christ, able to convey the “in spite of” love that God has first shown to us.

For in the suffering of the Shepherd, God has set the pattern for his people – as the only way to achieve true peace and freedom. In the same book Abbot Kodell makes the distinction that the so called forgiveness applied when someone makes a mistake – such as spilling something on your shirt or forgetting an appointment is not actually forgiveness but rather excusing.

Real forgiveness as shown in the Cross takes place when I have been hurt inexcusably: “Yes, you lied about me, and that cost me my job. It is inexcusable, and you can’t make it up. But I forgive you.” This is unconditional forgiveness flowing from unconditional love, the kind of forgiveness which the soldiers nailing the holy hands received. Cardinal John Henry Newman called this type of forgiveness “Christian revenge” – returning good for evil.

To live this out we need first realize that love and forgiveness are not to be equated with emotions. It may be virtually impossible to feel forgiveness for someone who has treated us harshly and caused us pain.

But the love and forgiveness required by the gospel are decisions. They are acts of will. For example, to quote Kodell again, “I love you when I want what is best for you and am ready to do what is best for you as much as I can. I don’t have to like you. And what is best for you might be discipline, as with a child. I forgive you when I say in my heart, ‘I want to forgive you’ or, if necessary, ‘I want to want to forgive you.’”

To love unconditionally, to forgive the inexcusable as God has done with us in Christ cannot be trivialized to the sentimental, for it is far more robust than our fickle feelings. Indeed, it has endured death, hell and the grave bearing life and love for all upon its wings.