

Homily 4th Sunday of Easter 2014

John 10: 1-10

There's a story told about a group of pilgrims of who were touring the Holy Land with a guide who was native to the place. The guide was explaining how since time immemorial shepherds did not walk *behind* the sheep but rather *in front* leading them and they followed him, just as Jesus described himself as the good Shepherd in today's gospel reading. As the guide finished this explanation, the group laughed when they saw a man walking *behind* a flock of sheep and *driving* them along with a stick. Someone commented to the guide, "I thought you said that the shepherds here always *lead* the sheep. Why is that man walking behind and driving them forward?" The guide answered, "Oh, that's not the shepherd. That's the butcher."

That's not the shepherd. That's the butcher. How often don't we also confuse the two. Using a somewhat less radical contrast, I think that we can still say that shepherding and "sheep herding" are not the same thing. A herder, like a cowboy, drives sheep. A shepherd, as one who tends the sheep, draws them to himself. The confusion between these two styles and methods is, I think, at the root of so many of the problems and conflicts in the Church today, and it begins with how we think about God. Is God fundamentally One who drives us in order to get us to be where He wants us to be, or is God One who entices us to follow Him in order to get us to be at a place which is good for us, a place where we can grow and flourish? How we answer this question will then determine how we think about the Church and what we expect the Church to be like. Is

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the Church fundamentally a community that drives us, that controls us, that pushes into places where we would rather not be, or is the Church a community that calls us to a place where we can become more than we thought we could ever be.

Here is where the change of metaphors in the story becomes quite important. Not only is Jesus the Good Shepherd, He is also the Gate itself. "Whoever enters through me", Jesus says, "will be saved". Here the scene has changed from the outskirts of a Palestinian village, where the sheep pens had gates, to the countryside, where the sheep pens often had no gates. In these rural areas, the shepherd would lie across the entrance to the pen at night in order to keep the sheep in, to keep them from straying out into dangerous territory, and in order to keep the predators out. The shepherd literally was the gate, the protecting buffer, as he lay down with sheep in order to keep them safe. I'm reminded of Pope Francis' words that bishops and priests must always be found in the midst of the people so that they never lose the smell of the sheep.

If we take seriously this image of Jesus as the "Gate", then we also need to take seriously that the only criterion for either entering or leaving the pen is Jesus himself. How often though in our church life have we not added more and more entrance requirements- what Pope Francis has called "pastoral customs" or "import duties"- and we have done this out of some kind of misguided fear, fear that people won't get it right, fear that God somehow needs to be protected, fear that our purity will be ruined.

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Another way of putting it is the way that Pope Francis has expressed it: are we what he calls "faith inspectors" or are we "facilitators of the faith of the people". Are we the ones who stand at the doors making sure that they are open and welcoming so that people can meet the love of God in Jesus or are we the ones who stand at the doors to make sure that only the pure sheep, the clean sheep, the sheep who are in "good standing" get in?

If Jesus is the Gate, then Jesus is the sole criterion for entering the pen, and whoever is trying to hear his voice, whoever is willing to come into the pen, however weakly and however imperfectly, that one belongs to the Good Shepherd and is loved by the Good Shepherd. Our mission as Christians is not to turn the sheep away but to help them in whatever ways we can to hear the voice of the Shepherd ever-more clearly. And all of us are called to listen for that voice, the voice of the One who is calling out to us, the voice of the One who knows us and who invites us to know Him and his sound. Before any of us can help anybody else to hear the voice of Jesus, we need to be sheep and we need to know and to follow the Shepherd's voice ourselves.

In Jesus' day, sheep pens were made of a round wall with no roof and one entrance, and the pen often served as a home for several flocks. Every morning different shepherds would come to the pen, and to separate their sheep from the others, they would stand at the gate and call out to them: "Here Fat Belly! Here Gray Leg! Here Curly Horns!" The sheep would follow their shepherd out to pasture because they

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recognized his voice and trusted it. This is the kind of relationship with Jesus that the story is inviting all of us into- to learn to hear and to recognize and to trust His voice.

Our difficulty, of course, is that we often find it hard to distinguish the voice of the Good Shepherd from the myriad of other voices that compete for our attention. We're often not sure which voice we are actually hearing. That's why its really important for us to work to develop an inner life of quietness and prayer so that we learn how to listen and to learn how to distinguish the voice of God in Jesus from all the other voices that pound into our heads every day.

If we listen carefully to Jesus' parable about sheep and shepherds in John's gospel, one overarching truth begins to emerge: the Good Shepherd has a deep, throbbing love for his sheep- the kind of love that God has for us and the kind of life-changing love that God desires us to have for others. At the heart of the gospel is the message that God wants *to love us back to life- to love us back to life*. There's a story that I came across that speaks about this.

There was a young shepherd, Pete, entrusted with the task of playing mid-wife to a herd of pregnant sheep. He worked hard to get the birthing room prepared; he kept a close watch for ewes who looked ready to give birth, because a new-born lamb could easily die of exposure in the still chill, cold weather. One day, the shepherd suddenly realized he had not checked on the flock for quite a long time, he ran out of the barn and spotted a ewe with a little white lamb laying in the grass next to her, cold and still. He jumped

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into his pickup and raced down the pasture. He picked up the lamb and laid him under the heater in the front seat and raced back to the barn. He put the lamb into the carpet-lined heated box in the barn in an attempt to bring him around. But he just lay, unmoving, in the bottom of the box. Minutes ticked by. Still no response.

Then the shepherd picked him up and took him into the house. "Fill the sink with warm water!" he called out to his grandmother as he burst through the door. They put the lamb into the warm water up to his ears. They waited, but there was nothing but a few feeble movements of his back legs. Then Pete tried to give him some warm milk. After he had eased the black nipple of the bottle between the creature's clenched teeth, he began to hear chattering breathing- a sure sign that the liquid had gone down into his lungs. "Great shepherd I am", Pete said to himself. First I nearly killed him by neglect and now I pour milk down his lungs."

Totally exasperated, he took the lamb back to the barn and sat in the straw holding the still, silent ball of wool in his arms. Then Pete prayed, "*God, I know this is just one tiny lamb. I know that there are millions of other lambs on this planet. I know that there will be many more in my flock. But I don't want this one to die. He's. .. he's special. Can you please save him.*" The lamb just lay in his arms eyes shut, still. Pete eventually put the lamb down and went out to check on the rest of the flock. When he returned to the barn and rounded the corner into the room where the heated box was, he gasped. There he was, standing on all fours. His lamb was almost dead, but he was now alive. *That lamb had been loved back to life.*

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As hard as it is, this is the mission of the Church. This is your mission, and this is my mission- to love this world back to life. There are lots of reasons that each of us can give as to why we shouldn't bother and why we shouldn't try. But there is one reason why we should- and I think that it trumps everything else- we should love this world back to life because Jesus is risen from dead!