

4th Sunday of Easter (A)

St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes

May 6, 7, 2017

Spending some time with the Scriptures during the past week, a couple of different thoughts came to mind. We usually think of the Shepherd as a pastor-type, someone in that role. But my thoughts involve all of us as well. The first one is based on a fact about shepherding that I never before realized. I always knew that flocks pastured together during the day, and that in the evening the shepherds would come together in the field where the sheep were. As they did this, the sheep would separate themselves from one another they knew the sound of their shepherd's voice, or they recognized the smell of their shepherd. There was no need for branding and corralling in those days. Each shepherd would then lead his flock to their sheepfold. What I did not know was that during the night the shepherd would literally lie at the gate of the sheepfold so that no sheep would wander away, or so that no thief or marauder would get into the sheepfold to harm or even steal some of the sheep. That a shepherd would lie at the gate all night amazed me! They guarded the coming and the going of the flock, allowing for safe entrance, and for keeping out predators. From this knowledge, a couple of thoughts came to my mind one is simple:

In most instances today churches are locked for most of the day. That is one way, I guess, to protect what we think is valuable. But it also keeps out the curious and the seeker, or those who simply want a quiet place to be for a while during any given day. Two personal examples then came to my mind from the past years: (Regina grieving for Cardinal Bernadin.)

When I was in my first year as a priest I was eventually assigned to St. Mary in Manchester. There was a lady there by the name of Alice. She was elderly, and quite poor. She spent most of each day in the church. She did some light cleaning, but mostly Alice was there because the church was warmer than her house was. I know that for a fact, because when visiting Alice I would see, and smell, the kerosene stove and kerosene lamps she used for heating and lighting. Only by God's grace did it not burn down. But Alice was also the self-appointed 'greeter and hostess' for the parish. No one came into the church vestibule without meeting and usually being greeted by Alice. (Alice was also just a tad bit nosey.) Nonetheless Alice was the shepherd at the gate ... there was no question about that.

Then I also thought about the occasion of the arson fire when I was pastor at St. Joseph the Worker parish in Dubuque. What a different outcome we might have had if like a shepherd at the gate someone had been at the door during the early morning hours when Willie got into the church. It would have been different for the church itself, possibly no fire at all. And it certainly could have been different for Willie. Willie was about 19, and just graduated from high school that

spring. I attended his graduation. On the night of the fire he had been at a party, at which there was much beer and also drugs. Intending to jump from the walk-bridge that crossed over Highway 20 just adjacent to our church, he found a shortcut through our parking lot. Finding the door of the church open by neglect, Willie got himself in, and then damaged the walls with graffiti, and cigarettes. (You say, ah! The very reason we keep our church doors locked!) Then for some reason, or maybe no reason, he started the fire. (At least he didn't make it to the walk-bridge that night.) But what if, like the shepherd at the gate, someone had been there to intercept him? We all can use interceptions from time to time.

Maybe some of us are even here today, because someone intercepted us earlier on in life.

Jesus is our shepherd, and not just any shepherd. He is our Good Shepherd. He is the one who laid down his life for us, his sheep. We are in this place because of what we observed and celebrated during Holy Week like a lamb led to the slaughter ... And when we die, we believe that it isn't over ... but the fullness of life awaits us. Again, because of the Good Shepherd who intercedes for us and even intercepts us when we are in danger.

There are some parents who do not allow themselves to fall into a deep sleep until the last child is in for the night. As an aside, my dad told me of the kind of trick his dad would play on his children: the last child in was to stop the wall clock from ticking so as not to wake the rest of the family throughout the rest of the night. But, of course, that would also let their day know when the last one did get in. (How I wish I had been able to know my grandfather!)

Being present and available to all who walk over our threshold here at St. Athanasius is so, so important. And to know the names of those who do cross our threshold is equally important. I feel sad when I hear people say, "I hardly know anyone at church any more." They mean it well, but it is a sad commentary on our culture and times today. We fail to know members of our own faith community. We walk past people without giving them much thought, other than maybe, "I don't know who they are." And how can we intercept on their behalf, when we do not know them. They need to know us by our voice, and could it be, even by our smell.

How is there time for all of this there are already too many things going on in my life? Quite honestly, maybe some of those current things are not as important and essential as we think they are. I am reminded then of a song ... I think I have shared it with you before:

When it's all been said and done
Did I do my best to live for truth
When it's all been said and done
Only what I've done for love's reward
Lord Your mercy is so great
And find purest gold in miry clay

There is just one thing that matters
Did I live my life for You
All my treasures will mean nothing
Will stand the test of time.
That you loo beyond our weakness
Making sinners into saints.

May we find ways to be 'waiting at the gate for others, as the Good Shepherd does for us