

4th Sunday of Easter – C

In seminary my classmates and I were blessed to be able to study in the Holy Land for a couple months. While there, we were taken a place where we got to have the experience of herding sheep. Specifically, we were given the task of moving a herd of about 40-50 sheep from one circle of stones to another circle of stones about 100 feet away. It ended up being complete chaos. Thirty-five seminarians simultaneously trying to move 40-50 sheep: we were all yelling, gesturing, gently trying to move them, and they had no idea what to do. Eventually we succeeded; no doubt the sheep had done the same thing many times before with other tourist groups and eventually figured out what we were trying to do.

But what was the problem here? Why were the poor sheep so confused and had so much trouble figuring out where to go? The problem was that they are used to listening to just one voice – the

voice of their shepherd. In this situation, there wasn't one single voice, there were many. It must have sounded like just a bunch of noise to them. And furthermore, we were all strangers to them. Even if just one of us had been speaking to them, they still would not have recognized the voice, because it wasn't the voice of their shepherd.

Elsewhere in Scripture we hear how Jesus had pity on a crowd of people, because "they were like sheep without a shepherd." We might not like to hear it, but Scripture often compares human beings to sheep. Nowadays if we do this, we're used to this being done in a pejorative way. But like it or not, and whether we realize it or not, there are similarities. We are both social creatures by nature, and we all need guidance from time to time. Sheep like to congregate in groups and like to follow a shepherd because that's necessary for their own safety. A sheep on its own is in danger.

And without a shepherd, they don't necessarily know where to find pasture, shelter, and so on.

When we are on our own, we too can often be in spiritual danger. When we are isolated, or when we isolate ourselves, all kinds of vices can fester. And of course, one of the basic human needs for real human flourishing is social interaction. And we all need the guidance of others. We simply can't figure out everything on our own. An infant is completely helpless on its own. But even as we get older and we become more independent, we still need the guidance and direction of others. Even if we were completely self-educated, learning about everything via books or the internet, someone else wrote those books or created those websites. It is the same with our faith: we have all received the faith from someone else: parents, teachers, catechists, friends. Even if we had never had any faith and were raised without any faith and then one day just picked up a Bible, started to read, and then eventually became

a Christian, everything in the Bible was of course written down by other human beings (with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of course).

And no matter how independent we might consider ourselves, no matter how much of a free-thinker, we all follow someone or something. We all do. We all adopt a way of life from someone else. It could be a very radical, uncommon way of life, but we're still imitating someone else. We all adopt a set of ideas or principles or a worldview that comes from others. Usually, we are most influenced by parents, family, friends, peers, and more and more we are influenced by media: what we see on TV, on social media, in movies, etc.

So the point I'm trying to make here is that, whether we realize it or not, we all look for a shepherd, and that's because we need one. That need to follow someone is built into our human

nature. And as Catholics, our shepherd – our true shepherd – is Jesus Christ. This Sunday is often called Good Shepherd Sunday because each year our Gospel reading is taken from John chapter 10, the “Good Shepherd Discourse”. And the other readings allude to this as well.

In the Gospel, Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” So Jesus is our shepherd, but we can only truly call him our shepherd if we do two things: first, hear his voice, and second, follow him. So I think it’s a good idea to ask ourselves whether we can say we truly do these things. And there are of course challenges to doing both of them. One of the main challenges to hearing Jesus’ voice is that there is so much noise in our world, so much noise all around us all the time, that it can be very difficult to hear his voice. While it’s difficult to escape all of it all the time, I think it is possible to reduce the noise. But we have to be very intentional about doing that. It doesn’t just happen. We

let ourselves be surrounded by lots of actual noise from all the media sources we now have: all the usual suspects of course. The internet took what was already a pretty fast-flowing river of information and turned it into a deluge, a constant torrent. We absorb so much news and entertainment and social media posts and on and on, it's no wonder that we have a hard time hearing Jesus' voice.

So it's necessary, absolutely necessary, that we be intentional about significantly reducing all the various media noise that we consume. And if you are a parent, it's your responsibility to reduce it for your children. If we as adults can't control it, how can we expect our children to be able to control it? They have to be taught self-control when it comes to screens and devices and it really has to start at a very young age. And we adults have to model that behavior.

I think we also have to strive – and this is a really tough one – to be less busy. Always racing around, having a lengthy and never-ending to-do list takes up a lot of space in our heads and creates a lot of mental noise.

Turning down the noise isn't for the purpose of creating a void, it's for the purpose of being able to hear the voice of Christ speaking in the silence of our hearts. So we must also carve out time for prayer in our day, and strive to be as consistent with that daily prayer time as possible. If we're super busy and fill every possible moment with noise, it's going to be difficult to quiet ourselves during that prayer time. Our brains are still going to be racing. So that's why we should strive for less noise in our lives – to enhance our ability to listen to the Lord in prayer. And if in your prayer time you find yourself very distracted with everything you have to do that day, all kinds of worries and concerns, start by putting yourself in God's loving presence and then just relate to

him whatever is on your mind and in your heart. And then just put it into his hands and ask Him to hold onto it for the duration of your prayer time. It's usually helpful to then read perhaps a few verses from Scripture or from a good spiritual book to give our prayer some direction, and then spend some time reflecting on what you've just read, how God might be speaking to you through it. And then finally, we ought to spend a few minutes of our prayer time just trying to be quiet in God's presence. Over time, and the more we do it, the more likely we are to hear the voice of the Lord speaking in our hearts.

After hearing the Lord, we're still not finished – if Jesus is truly our shepherd, we also have to follow him. We also have to act on His word. We have to put His word spoken in our hearts into practice in our day-to-day life. But just a word of caution about this: Jesus speaks to us most commonly through Scripture and His Church. Sometimes people make the claim that God told

them to do this or that and use that to justify all kinds of behavior. But we can deceive ourselves and we can be deceived. Jesus does speak through his Church. We have to understand Scripture in light of the teachings of the Church, otherwise anyone can develop his or her own personal interpretation of Scripture, and we end up with all kinds of competing narratives – i.e. more noise. The Lord speaks to us through the teaching authority of the Church, the teachings that have been handed down to us through the ages.

Let us listen for the voice of the Lord in our hearts and in our lives. Let us let the Lord guide us. He doesn't want us to be like the confused sheep that my brother seminarians and I tried to move from one circle to another, not knowing who to listen to or where to go. As Jesus tells us in our Gospel today, he wants to lead us somewhere: from this life into eternal life. So let's pay attention to his voice speaking in our hearts and follow Him wherever he desires to lead us.

- **May 11, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**