**The Many Good Shepherds Among Us**

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Last Sunday we heard Jesus describe himself as the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his sheep. At first, he condemns the religious authorities as mere “thieves and robbers,” who make no attempt to care for God’s flock. But, further along in that same discourse, Jesus shifts to a more charitable metaphor, which acknowledges the rabbis’ care for the people, while still questioning their motives and their level of commitment. He says they are like hired hands, who watch over the sheep because it’s their job, not because they have any special love for the sheep. When danger approaches, the hired hand weighs his own self-preservation versus the good of the sheep, and asks himself, “Are they worth my sacrifice?” The true shepherd never asks such a question, because he is totally committed to the welfare of his sheep. He *will* act heroically when called upon to protect them, for his love for them far outweighs any self-interest.

We might be tempted to think that this shepherding instinct is rare and exceptionally noble in our society today, but it is actually quite common, and mostly unheralded. In fact, it is so commonplace within families that we are shocked when parents do *not* demonstrate heroic virtue on behalf of their children. We expect mothers and fathers to sacrifice whatever it takes to protect, guide and care for their progeny, and we *never* expect them to ask, “Are these kids worth the sacrifices that I make for them?” We may not think of parenting as shepherding, in the biblical sense, and we may not think to compare a parent’s sacrifices to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, but perhaps we should. What parents would not gladly give up their lives to save their children from serious harm? The only reason that their commitment does not strike us as extraordinary is because we see it as part of a parent’s vocation. They are *supposed* to be good shepherds, who give up their lives for their children.

Once we realize how common this selfless love of a good shepherd is, it’s not hard to come up with other examples. Some of the first who come to mind are first responders, like fire fighters, police officers, paramedics, etc. During this pandemic, doctors and nurses who work with COVID-19 patients are now seen in a similar light. These are all people who put themselves at risk in order to protect the public from harm. Anyone who has seen them in action knows that they definitely are *not* doing this work primarily to earn a paycheck. They are motivated by the heart of a good shepherd, and by their vocation to serve others. When they see people in danger, even total strangers, it never dawns on them to ask, “Are they worth my sacrifice?” They simply protect and care for those who need them, because *that is what they do*, and they are fully committed to doing it.

Whenever our nation deals with another horrific school shooting, the heroism of teachers, coaches and school administrators often comes to light, also. People marvel at what these humble, often grossly underpaid, servants will do to protect their students. But, I can tell you, other people who serve in those jobs are not surprised, because the vast majority of them would do the very same thing in those circumstances. These people are good shepherds – make no mistake about it. They are accustomed to giving everything for their kids, and equally accustomed to very few people noticing or appreciating their dedication. When tragedy strikes, then everybody sees the shepherds’ hearts which beat within them.

There are countless other examples, of course. Many people protect and care for others on a daily basis. In many cases, they consider it their vocation. Hence, when heroic sacrifices are demanded of them, they rise to the challenge without hesitation. Nevertheless, there is one crucial difference between Jesus, the Divine Shepherd, and the rest of these dedicated shepherds that we see every day. It is the boundless expanse of Jesus’ flock. Most of the good shepherds we know will give up their lives for *some* people, but not for others. Their love and their commitment tend to have limits, and sometimes strict boundaries. Jesus, on the other hand, died to save his enemies and executioners, as well as countless strangers, in addition to his friends and supporters. He counted *all* among his sheep.

Most of us embody the qualities of the Good Shepherd in some of our relationships, but not in all of them. Too often we act more like hired hands, putting our needs first, and leaving others to fend for themselves. As Christians, we are called to be good shepherds for everyone, willing to sacrifice for others, and never asking, “Is that person worth it?”