

Called to Be Shepherds with the Shepherd Fourth Sunday of Easter/A May 7, 2017
9:00 AM Acts 2:14a, 36-41; **1 Pt 2:20b-25;** **Jn 10:1-10** (God really cares for, guides and protects the vulnerable; and we can find ourselves among the vulnerable.)

One of the most famous and popular verses in Scripture is “**God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.**” It shows up at football games, for what reason I don’t know, but it shows up at football games.

This gospel reading is not about God’s love of the world. It is about God’s care and protection for his flock. The whole world is not God’s flock. **God’s flock are sheep, but in the world there are also wolves.** Now if God desires the salvation of all, then **God desires that wolves be converted into sheep**, but per se they don’t belong to the flock. That’s what this is about.

My Latin teacher used to talk about the world, and he said, “It’s a dog eat dog world.” Recently I was in Africa. We saw all kinds of ferocious predators: hyenas, jackals, and lions. They tear apart their victims; sheep never do. Sheep never attack. There’s some real good reason why the word “sheep” is used for the flock of God, even in the Old Testament. God’s flock is peaceful, but very vulnerable. **Sheep are vulnerable, and the people of God are vulnerable.**

And so **Jesus** now is showing himself to be the champion of the vulnerable, the one who is **concerned for, protecting, and guiding the vulnerable.** And this scripture stretches the imagination to the point that the shepherd actually loves the sheep. Actually I doubt that’s ordinarily true, but it’s true here. **The shepherd loves the sheep.** And the sheep are lovable in the sense that they are always giving without complaint. They are shorn with no complaint. They give of themselves. They are all signs of the flock of God. So Jesus is positioning himself now not only as the shepherd but **also the gate and also the voice that the sheep can learn to heed and to recognize.**

Now there are different kinds of vulnerability. Some people are more vulnerable than others, obviously. For example, **the very young and the unborn and the very old are much more vulnerable than the rest in between.** On the whole the poor are much more vulnerable than the rich. However, no matter how rich one is or how much wealth one’s family has, **no one is exempt from vulnerabilities that come from misfortune or disease.** What family is there that doesn’t have someone with cancer? What family is there that doesn’t have some tragedy lying within it? No, no one however famous, rich, or powerful is exempt from tragedy. So on that level **we are all vulnerable, even though some more than others.**

But there’s a second level of vulnerability and that has to do with our moral nature, our freedom. **We are vulnerable to temptations**, to make poor choices that will lead us astray and in fact do us great harm. Advertisers are always trying to suggest that we need and deserve all kinds of things we obviously don’t need or deserve. And we can get bogged down with a sense of entitlement that is really life annulling, life destroying.

There’s even a third type of vulnerability because we are all, however educated, however intelligent, **we are all simply children in the spirit; and we can all be deceived.** We can all be

confused, and we can all be misled. And that is why this image of the shepherd is so compelling because it is an image of a **God who really cares for, guides and protects the vulnerable; and we can find ourselves among the vulnerable** if we just look and are honest.

This recognition requires three responses. The first one is we have to let God lead us. We don't have to; a lot of people don't. A lot of people do not let God lead. That's a free choice. **If we want the guidance of God, first of all we have to ask for it and let it happen.** Secondly, **we have to develop our ability to listen to the voice of the Shepherd.** This is not literally a voice like my voice, but it is something we can get used to when we spend enough time in quiet. That's why **every day we need quiet time.** We need to listen to the heart. Our days of too full with noise and activity even God cannot penetrate, because God does not overcome our freedom. The message of the Cross: God doesn't stop even evil will because he respects freedom. That means we have to be the ones to find quiet to listen. Thirdly, we need to realize that **God guides us and directs us as a flock.** We need one another. God does not guide and direct us as individuals. If God guides individuals, it's toward becoming part of the flock. Historically this has always been this way. It is our nature. As Aristotle pointed out, we are social animals. So God acknowledges our nature and guides us **socially through the community of the Church, the believers, the fold.** Even in the Old Testament the image of sheep going in many directions was the image of Israel gone astray, an image of sin.

And we have to note that in our society that is so full of this love of autonomy and independence, but for what—but for what? That is what this gospel is trying to get us to look at. **We need the community because Christ works through the flock, the community of believers.** Now when we let this happen, when we allow the risen Lord to be the Shepherd of our lives, we find that **he is including us in his ministry of shepherding.** The goal is not for all of us to be good sheep; the goal is for all of us to become shepherds with the Shepherd. That's the call to ministry. That's the call to mission. **That's what we are talking about when we say "Hearts on fire."** We are meaning that we become enthusiastic at the opportunity to serve with Christ, the Good Shepherd, the risen Lord. And very basic to the very notion of the gospel is the **need to care for the vulnerable.** It is a fundamental responsibility for the baptized, vulnerable in all three ways I mentioned: physically, morally, spiritually vulnerable. We need to care for each other. We need to care for the world; **this includes both the corporal and the spiritual works of mercy.** It is the business of all of us; all the baptized are called to works of mercy. Jesus said, **"What you have received as a gift, give as a gift."** The more we allow ourselves to be shepherded, the more the Shepherd equips us to shepherd. In this way the Church actually can gradually change the face of the earth.