

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

The Shocking Good Shepherd Fourth Sunday of Easter, B April 22, 2018
10:00 AM Acts 4:8-12; 1 Jn 3:1-2; **Jn 10:11-18** (We, his sheep, are as valuable
or more valuable than his own life.)

“I am the Good Shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”

When I was in Rome in 1995 studying the origins of Christian art, I discovered that **the Good Shepherd is the most ancient and most popular representation of Christ**, and I believe it has remained a very popular image in the hearts and minds of people through the ages. And yet there is something that is incongruous about this statement: “A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” Is this really true? **Has there ever been a shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep?** I don’t believe so. **Neither a hired hand nor an owner of sheep would really give his life for the sheep.**

Now people often say that the Bible employs images from the culture of ancient times, and people in those times would surely understand what was being said. In this case, I doubt it. **The people who first heard about a shepherd laying down his life for his sheep were doubtless puzzled.** I believe this is another example of **how unreasonable God’s love really is**, how unexplainable, how beyond bounds God’s concern for his people really is. So the intention of this image is not to comfort; it’s actually to shock. The intention is to **confront us with the true nature of love, the real cost of caring, the ultimate commitment that God, in Jesus, is willing to bear to alter the course of the world.**

Of course we know and do experience great personal sacrifice. **There are people who have put their lives on the line to protect others** out of a sense of duty or love for their families, their nation, or their people to protect them **from an enemy.** We laud this kind of behavior and we praise this sacrificial giving; and we call it heroism. **Heroism** is motivated by a sense of worth and value of those being protected, that they are as valuable or even more

valuable than oneself. And that is why **we honor those fallen in war because they have valued us and placed our needs above their own.**

But that is what **the Good Shepherd is saying. We, his sheep, are as valuable or more valuable than his own life.** This should be astonishing! We need to let it astonish us. God comes into the world assuming human life with all its needs, including the need to survive and to live, but puts our needs above his own, incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. **The mystery of the cross** is the mystery of love, and love reveals itself in a willingness to give. And in Christ, God has given all, everything, poured out, all of life! God has, as it were, **drained himself in love, in giving.** Not only does God make us his equal, but **prefers our needs to his own.** For some, as St. Paul says, this is a stumbling block; for others it's just foolishness, but for those on the road to salvation, it is the power and the wisdom of God.