

There are some voices abroad saying that priests aren't visible in their communities like they once were, that they just aren't as accessible when they're needed, not available for going the extra mile.. that they've ceased being the shepherds the people need. There are other young voices which, having been led by so many digitalized shepherds in whom they placed their hopes of belonging, having listened to so many voices misleading them to the truth they seek, have been flattened by disillusionment are enraged that "no one really cares about them", or "no one listens". Whom will the young hear when all the "Good Vibes" amount to a din and they find themselves spiritually deaf.. unable to take in anything lasting and truly good?

I heard a story the other day about a lost old lady, an older priest and one millennial shopkeeper that took place on Good Shepherd Sunday. An old priest who was already well behind in his duties by that noon, decided to stop off at a candy shop. Upon entering, he found himself greeting a very bored young shopkeeper. He handpicked two boxes of chocolate and was waiting to receive his purchase when, once again, the entry bell jingled. A bent over old lady opened the door.

The old priest saw a face hidden in shadow but the ceiling light glanced off her tears. He saw first the lips moving, then heard the fear in her frail speech.

"Father," in broken words she said, "I don't know you"..mumble, mumble,.. "but can you still give me a blessing?" The shopkeeper put the priest's chocolates down on the counter. "I'm afraid because I don't know where to go. I don't know anyone" . The old Indian woman stood shaking silently.

The priest came to her even before she had finished her first words. He asked her her name. .. " 'Teresa' and I have always lived here." He looked at her grey and downcast eyes and laid his hands upon her shoulders... and then upon the sides of her head where the lice roamed free. He felt her tremble. "Jesus sees where your tears are falling, Teresa".

He prayed to God on her behalf to restore her calm, to bring to her caring people, to bring her to lasting safety, to true belonging among other sheep. He would find shelter for her. He made the sign of the cross over her head. The shopkeeper listened, smiled widely, and turned pink.

“Will you hold me?”, the old Indian woman asked. A full color picture of Jesus holding a lamb flashed through his head. The priest not only held, but embraced her and held her for some would say was too long a moment. They separated and the priest turned to the counter, paid his bill and picked up his candy.

The young shopkeeper was looking intently at him, but, too moved with joy and too humbled by the moment, he could not look up. The Good Shepherd was among them. The millennial shopkeeper was still heard to be singing under her breath. Something remotely familiar had reopened inside her.

Teresa asked, “What is the name of your church?” The old shepherd told her. Would I be able to join there?

What do you think?

What do you think accounts for the fact that, even outside the walls of countless churches, the attachment of people to Jesus to be their Good Shepherd is so pervasive? One theologian employs the word “solicitude”: a term that connotes not only his accessibility, but God’s attention to us, His availability to save His sheep in any circumstance.

We learned from our study of the covenants of God the primacy of the Exodus event: how God chose from among all the deserving peoples of his created world, a people of undeserving slaves who were without a shepherd, and thus a choice peculiar... His choice was peculiar not in itself especially, but in the peculiarity of the shepherding relationship with the sons and daughters whom he adopted..choosing and saving them in particular, as His Son has chosen us to be among His flock.

After the revelation at Sinai, from slavery to the land he promised them, God coaxed and cared for, fed and watered them when hungry or thirsty, prodded and pleaded with them to love and obey. He protected them from enemies and from themselves when straying had satisfied their thirst and hunger for empty things.

He introduced them to His ways and the love language of His covenants. Because of His time spent just abiding among His chosen and the people’s coming to know Him as a God accessible, available and attentive at any time and for however long...because of the solicitude of this shepherd FOR THEM, the sheep come to entrust themselves to this one shepherd.

Only on the basis of their trust in Him do the sheep become the shepherd's "own". The sheep are not possessed as His own property; they give themselves to be His; because first, the Good Shepherd gave Himself.. to be theirs. .the One Who can save them.

Our study of Hosea took us into God's heart and mind, the heart and mind of the ideal shepherd to appreciate the steadfastness of the shepherd's love through the worst that can happen to a marriage and a fallen people.

Now, There is something wholly different -but still in the same Spirit-about Jesus' solicitude. His solicitude for us was endless.. it extended all the way to His self sacrifice on behalf of His sheep..FOR US..taking our places on the Cross... This joined the "Good" " to the "shepherd". And St. Paul said to us in Phillipians this morning that I want us to think longer about: that the true shepherd, the Good Shepherd, not only cares for his sheep with a devotion even unto death, but he knows and is known by them. In fact, one could say that the completeness of His knowledge of all His sheep is consummated in the completeness of His sacrifice for them.

How do we come to "knowing" our Shepherd, even though God's knowing of us is already complete? Well, how do we know anyone? We begin by personal acquaintance..and personal acquaintance is deepened by "next times", the blooming of familiarity, and then trust builds in as sheep learn they can depend on that shepherd's voice. A voice that dependably leads them to fresh pasture, that untiringly keeps the wolves at bay, so that soon the sheep associate the voice with all that they know to be "good." A bond is born. They know the shepherd.

So now a shepherd calls his own sheep by name just like he knows the number of hairs on each of our heads; he knows their qualities and quirks; he can pray for each intelligently; he can offer guidance. And the sheep hear His voice-something somehow familiar in them responds to the call which His knowledge of them enables Him to speak so as to reach their souls.

This bond casts a wide light, since those whom Jesus has in His "hand", those whom Jesus calls "mine" , are enfolded in the all-sacrificing love that qualifies as "loving them to the end". The attractiveness of this kind of love draws people, gives rise to fellowship..it means "belonging" to the lonely, the lost, to those who are convinced no one loves them..people like Teresa.

One insightful translator, who happens to have been 20th century Archbishop William Temple suggested this: that we can call the “Good” Shepherd as well the “Beautiful” One. We ought to call Him as well the Beautiful shepherd because the word in Greek, kalos, stands not for the moral rectitude of goodness, nor its austerity, but its attractiveness.

Knowing He has died in our places so as to keep us alive in Him is attractive, for in the end we can trust we will be with the source of all good and not alone, God’s attention to us will be elevated to our being in His actual Presence, and our belonging nevermore in question. The Good Shepherd draws us to come to know Him by the “love to death” He has shown us.

Teresa had said, “Father I don’t know you, but can you still give me a blessing?” It’s true she did not commonly “know” the priest, but she did recognize the collar, the yoke of Christ about a shepherd’s neck. So, in the most important way, she did know him at the instant of their meeting. Accessible..attentive..available

And it turns out as they parted that the old priest and the old woman did know each other.. in holy detail..for the one saw the stricken Christ in the other when the Love of the Lord took hold of him, and the other felt somehow the Risen shepherd was actually warming her heart to hope again. The millennial, whose friends say rarely opens her mouth, was left singing at her post. All because of the Good our Shepherd is made of.