

Homily for Good Shepherd Sunday 2010

Father David I. Giffen

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son & Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.”

These words from the Good Friday liturgy, from just a few weeks ago, often stay with me throughout the entire Easter season, and especially resonate on this Good Shepherd Sunday. This well known passage from the book of Isaiah, reminds us, that we, as sheep, are in desperate need of a shepherd.

For as any good shepherd knows – when sheep are left to their own devices – they do tend to stray.

Upon encountering other ‘dog lovers’ in the city of London, my wife Heather immediately asks a question, which often takes people by surprise, “Have you met Renee?” Unsure if she is referring to a particular dog, or some kind of celebrity, using a single forename, like Madonna or Prince, they will usually return her a puzzled look.

When referring to ‘Renee,’ Heather is, in fact, speaking about a man in London, who we know, as our city’s ‘Dog Whisperer.’ For a very reasonable fee, Renee travels around the city each morning of the week, picking up twenty-five or more dogs, taking care of them for the day.

Renee travels, with the more than two dozen dogs, to a piece of property, outside the city, and for about eight hours or so, leads the dogs, on an extensive walking journey. I remember being dumbfounded the first time I heard about this – asking how many

dogs this guy actually loses on these trips, and how anyone could possibly trust their beloved K9 to such a process.

But the truth is, no dog is ever lost, and they each receive excellent care, returned home each night, as happy as they can be.

Renee explained to me, that dogs are not so different from sheep – or from people for that matter – they are pack animals, who look for a shepherd to lead the way. That, in fact, the more dogs he picks up in the morning, the easier the walk will be, because the more dogs, who are united behind the shepherd, the stronger the pack becomes.

Renee rarely has a problem with a dog trying to get away, but instead, when he encounters a dog like our Otis, he has a problem with some dogs, thinking that they are mini versions of the shepherd themselves. Regardless of whether the dog may be a hundred pounds, or just ten, if our pup Otis sees a dog straggling behind or getting out of line – we hear he steps out of his paws and into the shoes of the shepherd – attempting to take them on.

The job of the Shepherd is to lead, feed, and protect the flock – while uniting them as one.

Throughout *our* lives – as individuals within a community – we each experience moments of what it takes to be the shepherd, *and* what it means to be the sheep. Whether we are called to leadership by the community, or whether we find ourselves uniting behind a cause, or a person, we each find ourselves, at different times, as both shepherds *and* as sheep.

At the ripe old age of twenty-nine, I can honestly say, that I never imagined myself, functioning in the role of 'shepherd' to *this* particular flock. As honored as I am, and as much of a privilege as it is to serve, there are times when I ask God, how I could possibly have been fit to lead such a flock.

This week will mark one-year since I was appointed as Vicar of Saint Paul's – and it has been quite the year.

We have seen some incredible successes (which I often attempt to broadcast for all to hear,) and there have been some failures (which I try to hide as far under the carpet as I possibly can.) Because, for some reason, some of us find ourselves caught in the falsehood, believing that the successes and failures of the communities we lead, are entirely dependent on us.

Something I have realized this week as I have reflected on 'what it means to be a shepherd,' is that when a shepherd believes that he or she is functioning in isolation – they forget that they would not be a shepherd, if it was not by virtue of the connection to their sheep.

A few months ago, a group of us were gathered in the Cathedral for a Friday night worship service, as we have done monthly for the last year. Having experienced great success and large numbers, last spring and fall – as the winter came, unfortunately the people did not.

On a cold and snowing evening in January, the time for service approached, and we were ready to begin, but there was not one kid in the house, not one youth to be seen – just an assembly of a few adults, who had organized the event.

Let me tell you, my confidence was shot. I felt embarrassed and frustrated and full of failure. 'Nice shepherding Dave,' I thought to myself – having no idea where we would go from here.

But the music began, and the liturgy started, and I saw a woman with three kids arrive. Having come from a small town, at least 90 minutes away, from a small church up north – they had heard about our Friday night service, and they wanted to come and to join in.

I couldn't have felt worse – what a disaster on our hands. What a disappointment we had created for these kids.

But a clergy friend of mine, who I had asked to celebrate that night, did not share in my despair – instead she opened the liturgy by asking the three kids who had joined us, to stand with her, behind the altar, and to help her to celebrate.

They assisted in the welcome, the proclamation and the celebration of the Eucharist – they experienced church like they had never before.

It did not matter that they were the only kids in the Cathedral that night – because in their eyes, and in mine, we all saw anew. The youngest of the sheep, teaching this lowly shepherd, not to doubt what God can do.

Because we cannot always see the Good Shepherd, it's easy to feel that we must be the Shepherd – and although some of us might be asked to hold the shepherd's staff from time to time – no matter what successes or failures we find – there is only one Good Shepherd who leads the sheep.

When my dog Otis steps out of his paws, with the mindset of shepherding the flock, our friend Renee tells us, that with a smile on

his face, he often has to remind Otis, who it is, that is actually in charge.

It is so easy to feel that we have something to prove – to justify our faith in what we believe.

But the greatest proof of the Resurrection in our world, and the greatest evidence of Easter life – are not the shepherds who step out in front of the flocks – but are the people who unite together and follow their Lord. The greatest evidence of Christ's presence before our eyes is not best seen in those who lead our church – but is best seen in the faithful followers, in you, who live out God's word.

We listen, we are known, and we follow as one – for we hear the shepherd's voice! The Good Shepherd, the Christ, the Messiah, our Lord, has made us to be as one – for there is One Flock and there is one shepherd – One people and one Lord of all.

Thanks be to God.