

**Sermon for 4 Easter, Year B**  
**by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson**  
**Holy Nativity, Plano**  
**3 May, 2009**

Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Notice that Jesus did not say “a good shepherd”. He said “*the* good shepherd”. He is the good shepherd hinted at in the prophet Zechariah. The one who is also the true king and true priest. The one who will be smitten for the sake of the sheep, but also rejected by them.

But in the prophets we find that the good shepherd, the one who is truly beautiful and admirable and *effective*, is God himself. Zechariah has this theme. But here he is only following a precedent set by Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And they are simply making use of an image and concept that was given by God to David, the shepherd king who was “a man after [God’s] own heart.” “The *Lord* is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.” He gives me good food and good water and rest. He saves my life and takes me on the good paths. He keeps me on the straight and narrow, but he never leaves me, so I always know I’m safe, even when I *feel* like it’s the end of the world.

God is the one who shepherds his people. He is the Good Shepherd. And Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” And he says it in such a way as to indicate his identity as God himself. The Greek words, *ego eimi* (“I am”), are not absolutely necessary to put together. Either of them can usually be omitted, although it would not always be a very elegant use of the Greek language. And remember that the phrase “I am” is understood by the Jews to be the sacred name of God. It’s not as though the Jews thought any Greek speaker who happened to say “*Ego eimi*” was blaspheming. But Jesus certainly uses the phrase provocatively. A couple chapters ago he made himself crystal clear by telling them, “Before Abraham was, I am.”

So here is the man, Jesus, who is God incarnate, the Good Shepherd. And he goes on to show us what God’s relationship to his people really is. What does the Good Shepherd do? What makes him the Good Shepherd? “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” That’s crazy! It makes no sense in merely human terms. Sheep aren’t valuable enough to get yourself killed for them. But we are that valuable to God. Jesus is the one who reveals the heart of the Father to us. And it is pure, unadulterated, self-sacrificial love. He may at times be angry at what we have made of ourselves. But he is always willing to do whatever it takes, to pay whatever it costs, to bring us back and protect us.

And so St. John, the source of this Gospel passage, writes in his first epistle, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God”! God has brought us into his family and made us heirs with Jesus of eternal life. He

has sent us his Holy Spirit to make us part of the family, to give us the family characteristics. If we're children of God, then we will be like him when we grow up. And we've just seen that to be like him is to love, no matter what the cost.

Jesus says, "I am the good Shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." By laying down his life, he has brought us into this intimate loving relationship with himself. He knows us and we know him, *just as* he and the Father know each other. We have been brought into the very burning heart of all reality, the Holy Trinity. And what we have found there is this radical, self-emptying, sacrificial love, which finds its clearest expression on the cross of Christ. And we know that that kind of love, from the perspective of the Holy Trinity, is simply what's right.

And this is where it breaks down for us. We know we cannot do this. We cannot live up to a standard that equates what is right to perfection and dismisses anything less as "of the devil." But St. John says, "Little children, let no one deceive you." You have been invited into the very family of God. There is no room in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity itself for sin. We are his children, and we will be like him. "And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Absolute perfection is the goal of every Christian life. And anything less is ultimately unacceptable.

That is the part we don't like to hear. That is the part that you're going to try to forget on the way home. But I'm going to make it as hard as I can, because this pursuit of perfection is not the requirement of some cruel taskmaster. God is not standing over us with a whip, waiting for us to screw up. (He wouldn't have to wait very long with me.) Instead, he makes himself one of us, in Jesus. He lives among us, experiencing the pain and suffering of living in this imperfect world. And then he says, "Follow me." And he goes to the cross, saying, "This is how it's done. You're mine, and I'm going to help you."

If we really understand the love of God in Jesus Christ, then we will have no option but to love him back. And the way you love God back is to pursue the perfection that he wants to help you eventually achieve. That doesn't mean that it has to be a done deal tomorrow. But it does mean that we work on it, every day, every week, every year. We work on it on good days and bad days, when we're feeling OK, and when we're feeling lousy. We work on it, *because God is working on it*. He is doing amazing things. He is saving us! He is so great! He loves us, and we love him back.

The early church got this. In our reading from Acts, we continue to follow the story from last week, when Peter and John faced the Sanhedrin, the rulers of the Jews. Now we hear what happened when they got back to their friends. Can you hear that conversation? "They told us we couldn't talk to anyone about Jesus

any more. We told them we couldn't stop telling this story, but then they let us go anyway."

And what is the church's response? Do they try to hedge their bets? "Well, maybe we could do some good without actually saying the J-word. Maybe you could just talk about the 'redeemer'. Hey, I've got it: maybe we should just try to help people who are needy, without getting into theology. That's what Jesus was really about anyway, right?"

No, the amazing thing is they don't respond at all! Their *lives* are on the line, and they simply don't try to solve the problem. Instead, they turn to God and ask him to deal with it. But they don't even ask him to take it away. They don't ask for comfort. What would my first prayer have been? "Please God, make the nasty Sanhedrin guys like us, or just get rid of them." Theirs is this: "Sovereign Lord, maker of all that is, grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of Jesus."

You want to see prayer answered? Put your entire life on the line for Jesus, and then pray a prayer like this one. These are people who have experienced the love of God. And they're loving him back. "You gave everything for me, Lord. So don't worry about my comfort right now. Just help me tell people what you've done, and keep doing it." They sell their possessions in order to care for each other's needs. "Jesus gave his life for me; I guess I can give up a field for you." The kind of perfect love that the Holy Trinity has amongst itself and for us is spilling out into the community. These people, drawn together by the self-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, are now loving each other in something of the same way.

These unnamed disciples of Jesus knew that God loved them. Jesus had died for them and rose from the dead. God was doing amazing wonderful things and had made them a part of the family business. He's still doing them, and we're in the family, too. He's not simply making *us* perfect. He's making all things new! He's in the process of remaking the whole world. And our daily battle, in the power of the Holy Spirit, with the sin that we find in ourselves is a part of that remaking.

"See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. ... And every one who thus hopes in [God] purifies himself as [God] is pure." And if we even begin down that road together, God will take our puny little efforts and make them powerful. And then he'll take us and send us out to shake the gates of Hades and to turn the world upside down.