

Did this Gospel reading make you smile a little? The apostles come back from their first mission (which we heard about in last week's Gospel) and you can see that they're excited by their results, ready to talk about it, and quite frankly, a little tired as well. However, the crowds around Jesus in Nazareth are growing larger all the time, and the apostles can't even get a bite to eat with all the commotion. Jesus, ever the good leader, sees their fatigue and suggests that he and the twelve head across the Sea of Galilee to a nice little cove on the other side for a picnic. So they pile on board a couple of fishing boats, pack up some loaves of bread and dried fish and set sail. Whether it was poor sailing conditions or distracted sailors, it takes a while to get to their secret camping spot. And lo and behold, what's in store when they hit the shore? The same crowd that they were trying to escape has followed them around the lake on foot and there they are, 5000 strong! I'm sure that the apostles had some interesting comments as they saw this welcoming committee!

But Jesus sees something different in the crowd, something that makes him think of sheep without a shepherd. What does he see? Remember that sheep are simple animals, domesticated for their wool, milk, and meat. In Jesus' time, they were highly valuable animals. Wealth was often measured by the number of sheep in your herd. However, sheep without a shepherd are completely at the mercy of the world. Sheep without a shepherd cannot find food unless they stumble across it. Sheep without a shepherd have no defense against danger – whether robbers or wolves or steep cliffs. Sheep without a shepherd face lives that are painful, brutish, and short.

So Jesus takes pity on them and teaches them. We don't know what he tells them exactly (wouldn't you love to know?), but he clearly takes the time to be a good shepherd for them. The story ends with a picture in our minds of Jesus holding forth to the crowd on the shore of this deserted place, the apostles laying on the ground beside him (maybe taking a nap?) and the crowd hanging on his every word. Next week we'll hear about what he does with those five loaves and two fish that are left over from the picnic plans.

So how do we relate to this story? I can't speak for you, but I know that I have trouble identifying with the people on the shore. After all, I'm a pretty well educated individual with a decent job, a place to live, and a nice car. I'm pretty sure I know where my next meal is coming from, and I don't feel as if I'm in danger of being robbed or attacked by wolves. I certainly don't think of myself as a sheep! Do you?

But if we're honest, we may admit that at various times in our lives, we are indeed like sheep. Maybe not in a physical sense, but definitely in a spiritual sense. Sheep are always hungry, always seeking to fill the hole in their bellies. We are hungry too, always seeking to fill another hole, the hole in our hearts. As we go through life with this hole in our hearts, we seek out all sorts of ways to fill it. Some seek material goods – the more stuff I acquire the happier and more secure I'll feel. Some seek fame – if everyone looks up to me, I'll feel important and loved. Some seek control – if I'm in charge, then nothing can sneak up on me and hurt me. Our mass media culture is very clever in this regard as well – notice how every advertisement subtly plays on the hole in our hearts, our basic uneasiness and lack of security. Do I look OK, smell OK, eat OK, drive the right car, follow the right political agenda, - oh my, it never ends, does it? We're milling around, bumping into each other, each individually seeking to fill the hole in our hearts. Kind of like sheep, maybe?

The hole in our heart is God-sized. It is only filled when we allow God in through his Son, Jesus. Jesus the good shepherd makes himself available to us in the Scripture, in the Eucharist, and in the Christian people that we surround ourselves with. With these three dimensions of Christ in our lives, we find food for the soul, we find guidance in how to deal with life's challenges, and we find safety and support from our friends and neighbors in Christ. Have you ever noticed how people who have a strong spiritual life seem the most happy and at peace, even in the most trying of circumstances? They are following the Good Shepherd.

There's another part of this story, however, that's very easy to miss. Don't you wonder what the apostles were thinking? Remember that they just returned from a mission to the surrounding villages in which they found themselves able to drive out demons and cure sick people in the name of Jesus. They saw Jesus do this many, many times before he gave them the same power. Now they're seeing Jesus preaching and teaching the people, feeding their spiritual hunger. Seeing how their Master is acting, I wonder how many of them asked the question – does Jesus expect me to do this too?

I think you know the answer. Yes, he did expect the disciples to do this too. At this moment of the Gospel, they weren't capable yet. They had more to learn. The story wasn't complete – and isn't until it culminates with the Resurrection. Ultimately, the power of the Holy Spirit, the power of love

manifested at Pentecost, drives them to be good shepherds too. And from the good shepherding of these eleven men called apostles is born the Church -- an unbroken line of bishops that continue in our day to channel the shepherding power of Christ. But it's not simply the bishops – we are called to be shepherds too! We are shepherds any time we come across a person with a hole in their heart and fill it with Christ's word, touch, and example.

The final irony -- as we act as shepherds to the children of God, the hole in our heart is not only filled, but overflows. From this overflow comes the power and the impetus to go out into the broken world filled with hungry sheep and feed them. At the end of John's gospel Jesus challenges Peter three times – “do you love me?” At each of Peter's insistent replies that he does, Jesus says what? “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.” We're asked to do the same.

During our lifetime, we will find ourselves as sheep at times. This is what being human is all about. Jesus, as human as the rest of us, is tempted by the devil in exactly the same ways that we are tempted – by wealth, security, and power. But he has overcome the world and shows us His way to the Father. As we enjoy His love, as we should, we will find ourselves nudged to share that good news, to help someone else who is bumping around as a hungry sheep. Try being a shepherd – I think you'll surprise yourself. Jesus shows us how – give that person your time, especially when it is inconvenient for you. The words mean more when there's a sacrifice attached, when paired with a good example. Let's look for a chance to be a shepherd this week....