

OK, your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. We've all heard of the famous French artist, Vincent Van Gogh. But I'm willing to bet that most of you don't know a whole lot about his very fascinating family tree. You might be able to guess some of these as we get into it. His dizzy aunt was – VERTI GOGH. The brother who worked at a convenience store was STOP N Gogh. The Grandfather from Yugoslavia was U GOGH. His magician uncle was WHERE DIDDY GOGH. His Mexican cousin – A MEE GOGH. The Mexican cousin's American half-brother – GRING GOGH. The nephew who drove a stage coach – WELLS FAR GOGH. The ballroom dancing aunt – TANG GOGH. The aunt who taught positive thinking – WAY-TO GOGH. The Sister who loved disco – GO GOGH. His niece who travels the country in an RV – WINNIE BAY GOGH. I saw you smiling – THERE YOU GOGH!

First, some biblical background. In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes 7 peculiar statements beginning with the words I AM. [Bread of life (6:35, 48, 51); Light of the world (8:12, 9:5); Door of the Sheep (10:7,9); Good Shepherd (10:11,14), Resurrection and the life (11:25); Way, the truth and the life (14:6), true vine (15:1). Each of them reflects something said about God in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Yet, of them all, Jesus' statement "I am the good shepherd" is the only one in which He describes Himself with a human role. When Jesus spoke of Himself as bread, light, resurrection, etc., those descriptions indicated what He offers humankind.

When Jesus describes Himself as the good shepherd, He is telling us a lot more than the typical picture that we might have of Him amid the flock or with a lamb on His shoulders. We are told -- 5 times in this passage alone -- that He lays down His life for His sheep. Each time this is stated, He emphasizes the fact that it is His choice to do so. He doesn't just risk His life or even lose His life -- He lays it down: His entire life is for His sheep, for us. Except for blessing the bread as His body given for His own, Jesus never explained His dedication to His flock more clearly. In this, He is not only the model shepherd, but the model human being who has discovered the purpose of life -- to be poured out in loving service of others -- and He chooses to fulfill it without reservation.

Sandwiched in the midst of His 5 statements in which He offers His life for His own, Jesus describes the heart of His relationship with them saying "I know mine and mine know me." Explaining the depth of what He means, Jesus compares His relationship with His own to His relationship with His Father. That sort of knowing involves an intimate sharing of life and of such love that the parties come to understand each other from the inside, becoming freely and inextricably bound to one another. Jesus explains that He has chosen to have an insider's knowledge of us, and wants us to have the same with one another. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 22 April 2018, p. 23-24)

Second, the image of the Good Shepherd is one of Christianity's favorite depictions of Jesus. It shows His great love, care and concern as He constantly leads us, His flock, to 'green pastures.' The 23rd psalm, which we just sang, is universally loved by believers throughout the world. The image of the Shepherd reminds us that Jesus' commitment to us knows no limits: "I will lay down my life for the sheep." Yet, that's not how the Gospels originally depicted Jesus' references to good shepherd. That image appears to have gone through at least 2 developments.

Experts on the historical Jesus believe we find the *original context* of the shepherd metaphor in Luke 15, where we have the 3 famous parables of the lost things -- lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son (the prodigal son). The opening lines of that chapter give the context: Jesus' enemies, the scribes and Pharisees, object to

sinner's 'drawing near to listen to Him.'" He responds to their objection by reminding them that even shepherds are concerned for the lost. Why shouldn't He, Jesus, follow their example.

Matthew gives the same basic simile in Chapter 18, but with an important change. Now Jesus isn't speaking to His enemies, but to His disciples. He employs shepherd imagery to remind them never 'to despise one of these little ones.' The evangelist's shift in audience seems to have been prompted by the old Pogo cartoon axiom "We have met the enemy, and the enemy is us!" In other words, eventually even good people can buy into the mindset of Jesus' enemies: "There are just some people we shouldn't care about – like anyone who disagrees with me, or doesn't see things my way, or is illegal, or isn't as orthodox as I am." Matthew's Jesus won't let His disciples forget that everyone, like every sheep, is important.

John's Gospel provides us with an additional nuance in the shepherd theology. As the great theologian Rudolf Bultmann would put it, "What Jesus once preached, He has now become." After His death and resurrection, everything changed. Referring to that sacrificial death, John's risen Christ states: "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." Though Jesus' preaching was originally at the center of His ministry, now He Himself has become the center of our faith. Salvation history has taken a significant turn.

Third, we need to do some deep reflection on all of this. Salvation isn't a matter of truth or how much we know, or knowing more than others about our faith. Nor is the Catholic faith a matter of getting all of our doctrine right. That's Orthodoxy, or right praise. And as important as that is, the Catholic faith is a matter of getting our LIVES right, that's Orthopraxis, right living. All the energy that so often goes into proving that I'm right and others are wrong is just feeding our needy egos, and it never takes us anywhere good. Toward the end of the Good Shepherd passage, John's Jesus mentions something that was obviously bothering the Johannine community. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd." Divisions had obviously started to develop in the early Christian community.

Look - from the very beginning it has been difficult for the Christian community to get along. Just read Paul's letters – he was writing to believers, not pagans. And they fought like Catholic cats in a sack! And also, very quickly, the community began to fracture into other groups. I've heard rumors that there has been some of that going on here at St. Andrew's. I'm sure they're just rumors. Nobody here is anything less than a saint, right? Including your new pastor, right? NO! As a friend of mine says "You ain't no box of chocolates!" And neither am I! But we're stuck with each other because God must have thought that it was a good idea. We'll all have our own opinions about it either already – or very soon. EVERY parish has its struggles, just like every family has its struggles. If there is an extended Catholic family represented in this church today that has not suffered from people either leaving the church altogether, or joining another denomination, blessed are you – and rare are you! But for the rest of us, me included, we've suffered the heartbreak and disappointment of family members who no longer cherish the Catholic faith like we do. So how do we handle this? What's the correct response? The same as the Good Shepherd's. LOVE. Lay down our lives in love for them. Love them. Do not preach to them. Be a good example of inclusivity, compassion, welcome. A shepherd gathering in the flock. No judgment. No condemnation. LOVE. It's the only thing that will change hearts. We'll never convince them with clever words or theological put-downs. Biblical Christians in the early centuries didn't seem to be bothered by the fact that diverse, even contradictory theologies were being expressed by different Christian communities. At one point in his 1969 St. Louis University Bellarmine Lecture, "THE CONTEMPORARY MAGISTERIUM," Jesuit Cardinal (then Fr.) Avery Dulles looked up from his notes, and made an unforgettable observation: "Had there been a Holy Office at the writing of the four Gospels, we Catholics would have just

one Gospel in our Bibles: Mark. But we would have references in our church history books to three notorious early Christian heretics named Matthew, Luke, and John.” As biblical theologian Raymond Brown often said, our ancestors in the faith had to have been very broad-minded to include those four specific writings in the same book. Each evangelist provides us with unique implications of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. If each author always agreed with the other three, we’d only have one Gospel. (adapted from PREACHING RESOURCES, April 29, 2012, p. 2-3) This fact alone should make us much more reticent to criticize fellow Catholics, or those from other traditions. When we criticize or condemn others, we are acting as wolves – we scatter, divide, and we break communities and relationships. This is never the work of Christ. The Greek word for Devil is Diabolos, the divider. When we are fracturing the church, we are acting like the evil one.

We’re dealing with mystery here. NONE of us can define the living God – or His/Her ways of acting in our world. Humility and love will lead us to imitate the Good Shepherd – in laying down our lives in loving service to Him THROUGH our service of others. May we all be good and loving shepherds, who gather in the sheep. Amen.