

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter “The Little Black Dot”  
Fr. Frank Schuster

My mother sometimes sends me some of the inspirational stories that get passed along through email (“if you like this...send to three others” kind of thing). Some of them are better than others...along with this one. Some of you might realize that I shared this at a daily mass not too long ago, but I think it is time that this parable graduated to Sunday. I don’t know who produced it but it goes like this. Once upon a time there was an elementary school teacher who surprised her pupils with a pop quiz. She put a piece of paper face down on all the desks, told the kids to turn it over at the same time and to begin writing an essay on what they saw. They all turned the paper over and...it is just a blank piece of white paper with a black dot in the middle. And so, all the kids started writing their interpretations about the black dot, where it was located on the page and what the size of the dot meant to them along with a number of metaphors of what a black dot could mean. Once the papers were turned in, the teacher read off the responses one by one. Some of what the kids said about the dot was serious and others were quite humorous. When she was finished, the teacher explained to them that this wasn’t a test at all but rather just something for the kids to think about. She explained that the exercise was to write about what they saw and every one of them wrote about the black dot but did not notice that most of the paper was in fact white. She explained that it was human nature to focus on the little spots of darkness in our lives and miss all the light that is around us. We find ourselves so preoccupied on the black dot, whatever that means for us right now or for our world, that we tend to miss all the light, all the goodness, and all the grace and beauty around us. At least, that is what I remember of the story my mother sent me.

I share this with you because, in our Gospel reading this weekend, Jesus talks about the two voices inside of us that compete for our attention. One is the voice of the Good Shepherd who is also the gate for the sheep. If we listen to that voice we will find good pasture where we will be happy. The other voice inside of us comes from the thief and liar who wishes to deceive us and lead us astray. I think we can all appreciate that there is sometimes a voice inside of us calling us to follow the Lord and there is sometimes a voice trying to lead us away from him. And many times, it is like a tug of war.

You see, I believe that one of the traits that many share in common is our human tendency to listen to that voice inside of us that wants us to focus on the negative. I don’t know about you, but when I think about my childhood and young adulthood I know intellectually that my past is filled with all kinds of wonderful times and blessings. They were. I think most of us would say the same thing. However, I think it is also true that we tend to recall negative memories far easier than positive ones. Why is that? Perhaps it is in our survival instinct to imprint negative experiences so that we avoid them later on or maybe this dynamic is simply another consequence of original sin. Probably both are the case. However, Jesus is warning us today about those two voices in our head, that I believe also exist in our society and world, that calls us either to listen to the Good Shepherd who loves us or that thief and liar who wants to destroy us.

Jesus explains this to us by giving us a beautiful parable about the Good Shepherd. And this most certainly is a really beautiful and meaningful image...provided we can get over the idea of being compared to a sheep. I enjoy pointing out every year on Good Shepherd Sunday, if you ever have been around sheep, this doesn't feel like a compliment. If you ever been around them, it is readily apparent that sheep are a bit awkward in how they move about, sometimes pretty stubborn, they aren't very smart, they tend to be a bit noisy, and they smell really, really bad. On the other hand, if we are honest with ourselves, we could recognize that all of us have areas in our lives that that are bit like that sheep, noisy, awkward, stupid and smelly. The grace that comes from that recognition is the opportunity that comes next, namely allowing the Good Shepherd to embrace us with all our faults and failings and let him love us back to himself. What gets in the way of that is that other voice. Instead of calling us to conversion and new life, that other voice simply wants us to focus on our little black dots to the point of despair, to the point where we won't allow God, or anyone else for that matter, to love us anymore no matter how much they want to. The grace that surrounds our failings, like an ocean, is God himself who knows us better than ourselves and yet nevertheless chooses to love us. We have a tendency to lose sight of that. Even with all our faults and failings, God desires to love us back to himself. This requires we give him permission to embrace us so to transform us. Only then can we start spending less time focusing on the negative and more time focusing on what's beautiful about us, about the people around us and our world.

What does that mean for us today? We are all trying to figure out the times we live in and for the most part, we are all trying to do the best we can. And yet, as we navigate the times we live in, it is good to be reminded about those two voices that compete for our attention. The Good News is Jesus says that his sheep know his voice. What this means is, if we truly desire it, we can hear him inside of us and follow him. We can. When we simply allow Jesus to love us, we know he will call us to conversion and new life by loving us back to him. He is the Good Shepherd, but he is also the Gate. And, because of that, no matter whatever black dots this world will throw at us, we have the opportunity now to not lose sight of the ocean of grace that exists all around us. This grace will remind us that our future is full of hope. And, it is a future that looks like good pasture and everlasting joy.