

4th Sunday of Easter “The Smell of the Sheep”.

Bishop Frank Schuster

One of the greatest gifts and correctives Pope Francis has given the Church is the challenge for clergy to take on the smell of the sheep. In the Archdiocese of Seattle, we are by and large very blessed with a generous and hard-working clergy who do just that. However, even here, we clergy can be tempted to fall into the trap of getting too comfortable, spending too much time focusing on our needs and not enough time in the community tending to others’ needs, especially the most vulnerable and marginalized.

I have always felt that the best remedy for this is for clergy to remember, me included, that before clergy can become effective shepherds, we must honestly accept in our hearts that we are also the sheep Jesus is referring to in our Gospel reading this weekend. Every one of us, whether you wear a collar or not, are the sheep in this Gospel reading who need Jesus the Good Shepherd. It is true that pastors and bishops are called by Jesus to be shepherds in the life of the Church. This is why Pope Francis’ gift and corrective to the Church calling clergy to take on the smell of the sheep is so profound. Having been a pastor of a parish for over twenty years I can tell you, if pastors are doing their job, the People of God shepherd us as much as we shepherd you. We need your prayers. We need your support, and at times we need your guidance. Again, Pope Francis’ focus on a synodal Church is spot on.

However, we should probably begin by fully appreciating what it means for all of us to identify as sheep. As I have enjoyed pointing out from time to time, identifying ourselves as sheep isn’t very attractive. Sheep are heavy, awkward, dim witted and, at times, smell really bad. What I find attractive about Jesus’ analogy is this: if we are honest with ourselves, we all have areas in our lives that are like that sheep, things that are heavy, awkward, stupid, and smelly.

After we have accepted that about ourselves, we are now in a place to ask the question: how does God want to handle us? Does God want to reject us? Does God want to ignore us? No. The answer is Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wants to take us in our smelliest moments and place us over his shoulders and take us back to his flock, the Church. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows and loves his sheep. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who will even lay down his own life for his sheep. That means you. That also mean me. This means all of us. That is what we celebrate during the Easter Season as Church.

The first challenge this Sunday might be to consider, do we really want this? Do we really want Jesus to embrace us in our smelliest moments like he embraces that sheep? Will we allow Jesus to put us over his shoulder in our worst moments and bring us back? That is a good starting point for spiritual reflection this week; however, I believe to stop there misses an additional opportunity for profound spiritual growth.

You see, when Pope Francis calls on clergy to take on the smell of the sheep, I can hear St. Vincent de Paul and Mother Teresa calling on all the baptized to do the same. Every one of us can be guilty of sometimes getting too comfortable in the practice of our faith. It is good to be reminded that the purpose of having a parish church at all is to have a place where we can love

God AND love our neighbor. We can sometimes get so comfortable and focused on loving ourselves that we can forget that we need to share this love with our neighbor, especially those who are vulnerable or marginalized. Sometimes these people live under our own roof. Sometimes these people live next door. Sometimes these people live on the streets. Sometimes these people don't look or think like us but they nevertheless are us, souls that belong in the company of the Good Shepherd.

What does that look like this week? My friends, I hope you can agree with me that the Gospel this weekend is very rich and has profound implications. We have all been given an important reminder that none of us can save ourselves. The world needs Jesus. The world needs the Good Shepherd.