

4th Sunday of Easter “The Blessing and Problem of Freedom”

Bishop Frank Schuster

This weekend we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. Abraham Lincoln had an ironic observation that I think is appropriate for this weekend. He writes, “The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep’s throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator. The wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty.” How about that? I’ll say it again because it so very true. “The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep’s throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator. The wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty.” I mention this because in truth there is a sheep and a wolf inside of all of us. One side of us wants to prudently restrict our freedom so to act like children of God and another side of us rebels against restricting our freedom so to cling onto vice, which ironically ultimately enslaves us.

Bob Dylan said the same thing in many of his songs. I liked this lyric as an example, he sings, “Once I had the mountains in the palm of my hand and rivers that ran through every day. I must have been mad, I never knew what I had, until I threw it all away.” Personally, I like the simple way Bono of U2 put it when he sings, “in New York freedom looks like too many choices.” I think that is putting a finger on something very true that affects our spiritual journeys. In New York, in Western Society, at the supermall, on the internet, and in our relationships, freedom can look like way too many choices. Not all of them are good for you. Every so often we wake up recognizing that we have failed. We can’t shepherd ourselves. We need better shepherding.

The Gospel reading this weekend reminds us that if we are going to be part of Jesus’ flock we must know his voice and listen to him. This means listening to him even when we do not want to, especially if the wolf inside of us would rather howl. Now, Jesus not only describes himself as a shepherd. Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. And this is good news if we are sold on the idea of being like sheep in the eyes of our Lord. On the other hand, this can be a tough message for us at times, because when it comes down to it, in American culture, who wants to be a sheep?

If we are honest with ourselves, the analogy of being a sheep doesn’t seem very attractive. Anybody who has been around a sheep will tell you that they are heavy, awkward, dim witted, and at times smell really bad. What I find attractive about this analogy, however, is we all have things we deal with that are heavy, awkward, stupid, and smelly. In the bible, what does Jesus do with sheep that are heavy, awkward, stupid, and smelly? Jesus, the Good Shepherd, takes that sheep and places it over his shoulders and leads the sheep back to safety, into the heart of a living breathing community of faith, into 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! This is what we are celebrating during the Easter Season.

The challenge this Sunday I think is to consider, do we really want this? Do we really want Jesus to embrace us like he embraces that sheep? Or do we find the wolf more attractive? Like Abraham Lincoln observed, "The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator. The wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty." And in our culture, freedom at times looks like way, way too many choices and it is not all good for us.

And so now, let's have homework assignment this week. At some point this week most of us will find ourselves surfing the internet, checking out websites and such. As you do so, take a little time to just categorize what you are reading or viewing and put them into three categories and the three categories are these: good for my soul, neutral/neither good or bad for my soul, and gee, that is really bad for my soul. Try it sometime this week. I think it is a good reminder for us. You can also perform this homework assignment next time you visit a mall. As you wander through the mall or shopping center, as you observe everything people are peddling there, you can categorize this or that: good for my soul, neutral/neither good or bad for my soul, and yup, bad for my soul. And during those moments, we can have a conversation with Jesus, we can listen to his voice calling us to better pasture, calling us to better decisions and choices, calling us to what will ultimately make us happier in this life and the next....if we choose to. Again, it boils down to the problem of freedom, doesn't it? If we use freedom well, it is a blessing that leads us to God. If we use freedom poorly, we can run into some real problems.

My friends, every one of us has a lamb and a wolf inside of us. We are challenged this week to consider how society defines personal freedom and how Christ defines personal freedom. Let me tell you, one definition can shepherd us to destruction. A better definition can shepherd us to salvation through Christ our Lord. Amen.