

4th Sunday of Easter (Year B) – April 22, 2018

ACTS 4:8-12; PS 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29; 1 JN 3:1-2; JN 10:11-18

Years ago, as a **seminarian**, I had a parish assignment as part of my formation for priesthood. I stayed for a time in that parish's **rectory** where one of the three priests who lived there was a **strict vegetarian**.

One night after dinner, I got up from the table to **clear dishes** and to **put the leftovers** into Tupperware containers which, in turn, would go into the **refrigerator**. Growing up, I noticed that my **Mom** would always **consolidate** things in order to maximize space in the refrigerator...so that's what I did!

In my effort to save space in the fridge, I had put the one remaining chicken breast in the *same Tupperware container* as the rice. The next morning, I found out—from a **red-faced, sputtering, enraged “Father Vegetarian”**—that this was a **terrible mistake**. He read me the riot act saying, **“Do you realize how sick I could get from eating the rice that came into contact with that chicken?”**

I knew better than to say what I was thinking: **“No, I’m a carnivore, so it would never even occur to me!”** Instead, I just let him vent. And though I **didn't** exactly appreciate the *manner* with which he reprimanded me, I *did* come to appreciate the **ramifications** of his **dietary choice** and was very careful not to do anything again that could harm his health...even if it meant **more clutter** in the **fridge!**

I hadn't thought of that incident for **years**, until **this past week** as I was looking at the **Readings** for **today's Mass**—particularly the distinction between a **good shepherd**—which **Jesus** likens to *himself*—and a **bad shepherd**—whom **Jesus** calls a **“hireling”**.

In **today's Gospel**, **Jesus** distinguished between **good** and **bad** shepherds:

A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. (Jn 10:11-13)

So, what does this Gospel have to do with “**Father Vegetarian**”?

Well, it has *nothing* to do with his *vegetarianism*...and *everything* to do with his **fatherhood**.

How so?

Well, imagine if every **spiritual father**—every **priest**—were as vigilant about what he “*feeds his sheep*” (cf. Jn 21:7), as **Father Vegetarian** was about what he **fed himself**. Such a flock would be very **well-tended** and **healthy**, wouldn’t it?

Here, of course, “**feeding the sheep**” means **teaching the Faith**...and doing so in a way that is not only *NOT* **harmful** to the flock, but rather, **most beneficial** for their **spiritual health** and **wellbeing**...and ultimately, their *eternal salvation*.

So, if a priest is extremely vigilant in **preparing** and **serving** the **spiritual diet** for his flock—making sure to offer them only what is **true**, and refraining from exposing them to the **toxic** diet of **false teaching**—*then* he is a **good shepherd**.

Rather than creating **doubt** or **mistrust**, he helps his people to **understand** and to **trust Jesus**—through the very **Church** which Jesus established—and which Jesus promised to **guide** and **protect** through his own *Holy Spirit*.

Authentic teaching is not only **threatening** to a **secular society** like ours which claims that people can have **different “truths”**.

Authentic teaching can also be *dangerous* to the **teacher of the Faith**—so costly, at times, that the society will go to extremes—event **violent** ones— in order to silence the proclamation of the **Gospel**.

Feeding the sheep in a **faithful**, **courageous** and **charitable** manner necessarily **costs** the **shepherd** something, especially in a society that so often opposes the teachings of the Catholic Church whether out of **ignorance**...or out of **malice**.

So, **each shepherd** must determine where his **loyalties** lie.

A good shepherd will be loyal to **God the Father**.

A bad shepherd will be loyal to the **Father of Lies**—*even as he sells himself to his “audience” as faithful to God and to the Church!*

What does **Jesus** say about those **false teachers** whose **loyalties lie** with the **Father of Lies**?

The same thing he said (in **John’s Gospel**) to Jews who opposed him:

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He...has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (Jn 8:44)

One of the most **obvious** clues that you’re dealing with a **bad shepherd** is that he will suggest—sometimes **subtly**, sometimes **brazenly**—that “**the Church needs to reexamine or change Her teachings**” or that “**the harsh language of the Catechism is hateful or hurtful to certain ‘communities’**”.

There is a lot of **poisonous fare** being offered to the **Catholic fold** these days, and some of the **false shepherds** have convinced their flocks that they’re being **led to green pastures**...while they’re actually being *driven off a cliff*.

When a shepherd opposes **Jesus** and his **Church**, it is not the **Lord** and the **Church** who need to change, but the *shepherd* who needs to be **brought back into line**. And it has been this way since Jesus chose to establish his **Church**, and to build his **Kingdom**, by **collaborating** with us *flawed human beings*.

We see this in **Matthew’s Gospel**, where Jesus founded his **one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church**, and appointed **Peter** to be its “**Prime Minister**”—the first *Pope*.

Mere moments after being **affirmed** in his **faith** and **confirmed** in his new **role**, Peter rebukes **Jesus**, after Jesus makes clear that the mission he has received from his **Father** is going to cost him his *life*. **St. Matthew** describes the scene this way:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.” (Mt 16:21-23)

Satan had convinced Peter that he knew better than *the Son of God*. He played on Peter’s **pride**. Much later, after Jesus was **arrested**, and Peter was **confronted** in a threatening way about his **association** with Jesus, Peter denied his Lord *three times*. That time around, Satan played on Peter’s **fear**.

Jesus knew this was going to happen, even if *Peter didn’t*. In Luke’s account of the **Last Supper**, Jesus said to Peter:

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers.” [Peter] said to him, “Lord, I am prepared to go to prison and to die with you.” But he replied, “I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows this day, you will deny three times that you know me.” (Lk 22:31-34, NAB)

Notice that Jesus said, *“once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers”*. Jesus knew Peter’s **pride** would turn to **fear**...when *push* came to *shove*.

Yet Jesus had a **plan** in mind for Peter’s **redemption**—*if* Peter were prepared to **repent**. And his **plan** was based on a **principle**—a reality about the Lord’s mercy—found in one of Jesus’ **parables**:

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one

sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Lk 15:4-7)

For Jesus, his concern for his **lost sheep**, extends even to his **wayward shepherds**. After he had risen from the dead, the **Gospel of John** shows Jesus offering **Peter** that chance to *turn back*:

Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.” (This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God.) And after this he said to him, “Follow me.” (Jn 21:15-19)

Jesus said that a *good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep* (cf. Jn 10:11).

The Devil tells the bad shepherd to “lay down his sheep...to preserve his life.”

Peter did this in the most **egregious** way by abandoning the *Lamb of God* to a **cruel fate**...in order to *save his own skin*.

When Jesus gave Peter a **second chance**, through **three affirmations of love** for Jesus, we notice that Jesus then told Peter he needed to *demonstrate* this love:

“Feed my lambs...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep.” (cf. Jn 21:15, 16, 17)

In other words, “If you really *love me*, then *be a Good Shepherd...like me*—willing to lay down your own life *for the good of those I entrust to you.*”

Jesus—the *Good Shepherd*—*loved his own who were in the world [and] he loved them to the end* (cf. Jn 13:1).

He never shrank back from speaking the truth, even when it put him at odds with the **secular elite** and the **gutless secularized religious leaders** of his own day. He accepted the mission of mercy which would ultimately cost **him** his *life*, but which would gain *eternal life* for his **flock**.

The mark of a “**hireling**”—a **false shepherd**—is that he’s more concerned about the *fact* that he has a *following*...than he is about the *souls* of those who follow him.

Jesus said: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.”* (Mt 7:15-16)

If the shepherd you follow—whether in your **parish** or in the **popular media**—is leading you *away* from the **Catholic Church** that the **Good Shepherd** established—*by causing you to question your own Church’s concern for sinners*—then he’s not just **leaving you vulnerable to murderous wolves**.

He is a wolf...even if he speaks in a **gentle voice** and says “**welcoming**” **things!** He’s *welcoming* you into a **trap** because all he really cares about is **himself** and his *agenda*.

On the other hand, if the **shepherd** you follow is willing to risk you **not liking him** because he loves **you** more than he loves *your esteem* for **him**, then don’t hesitate to eat what he offers you.

Because you can be confident that **such a good shepherd** will feed you “**the good stuff**”!

Just like *Jesus!*