

A few weeks ago, I was looking something up on the internet and I came across an apparently religious website. As I continued to read, I saw that it was not going to be helpful at all. It was full of polemics. The contentious rhetoric pointed out the faults of others who did not believe the narrow path set forward by the site. Just as I was judging the website based on the thorny fruit it was producing, I got a loud verbal warning telling me to call Microsoft for technical help for a computer problem. I turned the computer off and did not call the recommended number. In fact, it was a scam meant to hack into my computer. A simple reboot solved the problem. Had I not noticed the ill fruit beforehand, I might have mistakenly followed the bad advice of the internet predator out to do harm.

Jesus teaches “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves. By their fruits you will know them” (Mt 7:15-16a). Wolves can be awfully clever and they are often difficult to spot. Jesus had a knack for seeing the true intentions of others. Where he recognized genuine faith, he responded with many healings. He also recognized the self-serving intentions of many Pharisees and scribes. They laid heavy burdens on others while finding a way to skirt the main point of a biblical teaching.

We all need to be on guard against wolves. Wolves often times try to manipulate our emotions to exploit us. Knowing the biblical call to reach out to those in need, wolves sometimes prey on our good nature by pretending to be hurt and needing assistance. Some years ago, a woman tried to elude airport security by using a wheelchair to smuggle a weapon through security. The agents did not have all the technology TSA uses today but something seemed a little fishy and they trusted their gut to look a little closer. They found the wolf in sheep’s clothing. Sadly, we all pay the price. We are all subject to more and more screening as we pass through major airports.

Wolves sometimes play on our greed. One of the most notable wolves in recent decades was Bernie Madoff. He defrauded thousands of investors out of tens of billions of dollars by creating a front of respectability and offering high investment returns. If something looks too good to be true, odds are it may not be what it appears to be. “Madoff’s apparently ultra-high returns persuaded clients to look the other way.”ⁱ In 2009, Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison and forced to forfeit \$170 billion.

Jesus identified himself as the Good Shepherd. Let us look for a few qualities that will help us to follow the shepherd rather than get taken in by the wolf:

- “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber” (Jn 10:1). Doing the right thing often has a price to it. It often requires hard work and avoiding a short cut that cuts corners.
- Sheep recognize the voice of the shepherd. In prayer we listen. In the silence, Jesus tries to guide us. We may need to turn down the volume on the many distractions that surround us in order to hear the quiet whisper of our conscience.
- “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff comfort me” (Ps 23:4). If we find ourselves in the midst of a storm, but remain at peace, we should thank God for leading us through the valley.
- Jesus was willing to lay down his life to save his sheep. He suffered and died on the cross to set us free. This is the ultimate mark of a Good Shepherd.

In following Jesus, we are called to a life of sacrifice so that like Jesus we may serve others in need. “By their fruits you will know them.” (Mt 7:20).

ⁱ investopedia.com/terms/b/bernard-madoff.asp