

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is traditionally known as Good Shepherd Sunday, for reasons that are probably pretty obvious to you. I was wondering how to situate the readings in the context of life as we live it today, since not too many of us are shepherds any more. Then I remembered that one of my friends, Bob Blair, who's also a deacon, worked for many years on a farm not too far from here, so I asked him what he thought it meant to be a good shepherd these days. He laughed and told me he had a story he thought I'd enjoy.

One day, when he was driving a tractor out to the north forty somewhere, he noticed a strange-looking dark lump on the ground off to the left. Curious, he turned the tractor and went to investigate. He found a newborn calf lying on the ground, still wet from birth. Its mother was nowhere to be found. The calf had been born and abandoned. Bob knew how stories like that end and what he had to do next. Turning off the tractor, he went over to the calf, picked it up and slung it over his shoulders. If he could get the calf to safety, he knew, it would have a chance at life in spite of having been abandoned by its mom.

As he walked back to the barn the calf, having no idea of what was happening to it, moored unhappily and squirmed around, trying to get away. Bob spoke to it in that calm, consoling voice all deacons have. The calf didn't understand English though and Bob quickly found himself covered with a smelly cocktail of materials that until very recently had been inside the calf. The complexion of Bob's words to the calf changed dramatically, but he soon fell quiet again as he realized that the calf had no idea what was happening to it and was just scared out of its wits. In his heart he knew that he was all that stood between the calf and certain death. No matter what, there was no way he was going to let that calf down.

Eventually he got the calf back to the barn, where he was greeted by the farmer with surprise, laughter and gratitude. Bob started to laugh too, in spite of being a mess. What difference did it make what he looked and smelled like, anyway? The calf had been saved. Laughing together, they called Bob's wife, Elaine, who brought him some clean clothes and shared in the joy. After a shower and a change of clothes the farmer warmly thanked Bob again and told him: "You're

what it means to be a Good Shepherd.” Bob’s too humble to share the spotlight with Jesus, so he said he was just happy that God had used him to save the life of that helpless little calf.

Some of the parallels between Bob’s experience and the parable of the Good Shepherd are pretty obvious, but others are perhaps not. Let’s take a look. At the simplest level we could ask ourselves if we’re the kind of people who would stop to save a helpless animal from certain death. Would we drop what we’re doing and go help, or would we prefer to think that it’s not our job? I suspect most of us would stop and help, if we were confident we weren’t going to make matters worse or get hurt. But what about stopping to help people we encounter who are leading lives headed towards certain death? What might we choose to do?

Let’s go beyond the obvious now and take a look at things from the calf’s perspective, since it’s really our human perspective, too. Like the abandoned calf, here we are on Earth, pretty helpless, doomed to death unless a Good Shepherd comes along to save us. Are we receptive to God’s intervention through Jesus, or do we sometimes find ourselves more like Bob’s calf, bleating and making a big mess?

If we dwell on that question for a while, we’ll soon find ourselves pondering the limitations of human understanding and the radical helplessness that’s implicit in the human condition. Bob’s little calf had no idea of what its situation was, how much trouble it was in, or what this person carrying it was up to. Although we know that Bob was doing the kind and compassionate thing for the calf, the calf had no such understanding. All it knew was that it was being taken someplace it couldn’t imagine, and that it was absolutely not in control.

Are there perhaps times in our lives when we too are challenged to trust without understanding? Do we find ourselves responding to lack of control like the calf, dumping on the very people trying to save us?

My friend Roger told me about a time in his life like that. In a two-week period, he lost his job, he and his wife suffered the miscarriage of their firstborn twins and his beloved dad told him he had just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. If you ever wanted to see what an angry, helpless person looked like, you'd have seen him sitting there in Starbuck's that rainy morning.

He was furious with God and told me he felt picked out for special punishment even though no one had done anything to deserve it. He didn't understand and challenged me to explain. After sincerely extending my condolences, I told him I didn't run the universe and had no rationale to give him beyond pointing out that everything, enormously sad as it had been, had also been in the realm of things that can befall anyone, anywhere. I reminded him that I taught statistics over at RPI and that although he might've felt singled out, in reality he was no exception.

Since he was a man of faith, I told him, all he could realistically do was to lean into his relationship with God, embrace the Eucharist, pray for the grace of trust in the absence of understanding, and face what had happened to him as best he could with his family and friends. Perhaps in time he might be in a position to reflect and find some hidden wisdom in the events that had befallen him; appreciate the Eucharist from an entirely new perspective, and maybe eventually provide consolation to others going through what he himself had experienced.

If he was like me, I said, he might just find it's sometimes the case that the deepest wisdom and fullness of life comes by way of life's most bitter suffering. How often had I been angrily helpless in my life, I told my friend, only to find myself rescued by God and taken to a place I could never have imagined. It all went better when I had the presence of mind to allow God to carry me; to trust without understanding.

Sure, it's OK in the moment for us to roar at life's tribulations, I told him, but it's also wise to remember as best we can while we're doing so that we're all being carried on the shoulders of the best Shepherd humanity has ever known, and that there's no way he's ever going to let any of us down, no matter what.