

[Readings: Acts 4:8-12; Psalm 118; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18]

Today is “Good Shepherd Sunday” as well as the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. We dedicate this one day each year to pray for church leaders: those we already have, and those we need for the future. If you love the Church, pray for those who lead her. If you don’t like the way the Church is headed, if you have disagreements with certain decisions and pronouncements, then you may have to pray twice as hard! I’ve had to do that a lot recently! But more than that: You might consider that your dissatisfaction may itself be a call to service if not to leadership.

It could easily be called “Good *and* Bad Shepherds Sunday” because there’s almost as much in the readings about bad shepherds as well as good ones. In the bad category are the leaders and elders of the people. Saint Peter accuses them to their faces of not recognizing what was plain as day: Jesus is the Messiah and through Him alone comes salvation.

The Letter of John ups the ante by implicating “the world” in not knowing Christ. And Jesus Himself says the hired shepherd really doesn’t care about the sheep and abandons his protective role at the first sign of danger -- and thereby St. John condemns the same authorities St. Peter would later have in his sights.

Which brings us to the good -- the ones who like Peter and the first disciples obeyed God and not men; like the early believers who knew Christ and thereby became children of God and members of the flock the Good Shepherd tends and for which He lays down his life.

What kind of shepherds people need and what kind of flocks they will be are good questions to ask. In the Good Shepherd story, forget about the hired man, the sheep, and the wolf. We know the wolf will attack, the hired help will bolt, and the vulnerable sheep are in danger. Those characters play to type predictably. As in a movie, the bad guy moves in for the kill, the working stiff saves himself, and the victim is exposed.

The good shepherd, meanwhile, does the courageous thing: risks his life for the sheep that belong to him.

In the movie version, we'd expect this too: The hero would put himself or herself in harm's way because someone is in need. We'd expect the hero to win, or it wouldn't be a satisfying movie. Yet sometimes the hero dies in rescuing the vulnerable one. While this makes the ending bittersweet, self-sacrifice is a recognizable part of the code of good storytelling.

The most curious detail of this story isn't about the wolf, hired man, flock, or even the shepherd's sacrifice. It is about those other sheep that don't belong to this fold. The sacrifice of Jesus is not just for the flock in plain sight, but for these mysterious others too.

Scholars have identified the mystery sheep as future believers – like us. Before we were born, Jesus accepted death for our sake. These “other sheep,” however, might also be the non-Jewish Christians who came to faith after the time of Jesus.

Though the mission of Jesus was mostly limited to His fellow Jews in His lifetime, the Church evolved into a Church of Gentiles in ages to come.

It's also possible that the “other sheep” refer to believers who, by the generation of this Gospel, were already out there, sharing the faith of the apostles but separate from the ways of the community of St. John.

Most importantly, the “other sheep” could include other groups who live Christ-like lives outside the boundaries of the formal Church. The Good Shepherd may well have plenty of flocks we have not yet approached! Maybe that is why Jesus is so inclusive of people who are outcast and living on the fringe.

There are so many alien voices calling out to vulnerable sheep. Some of those alien voices are evil voices disguised as soft, harmonious voices in our movies, in our television programs (except for the Eternal Word Television Network and Catholic Television Network of Detroit which always tell the truth!), in biased print and Internet journalism, and even in some of the novels we read.

Those voices are so convincing we don't even know that they are speaking a message of lies. The challenge for you and me is to recognize the

voice of the Good Shepherd (through the Church), follow His lead (read and follow the Bible), and have an eternally happy ending to our earthly pilgrimage.

Regarding today's Responsorial Psalm -- Have you ever been the "odd man out?" I remember how badly it stung. The kids in the neighborhood were choosing up sides for a sporting event game, and I was usually the odd man out. Rejected. Told to sit on the sidelines. Sports were not my strong suit. Whatever sport I tried ended up looking like comedy relief! So, I became the class clown and the class nerd!

And then there was another time when the kids were gathering for a game when an older kid who was creative took charge. Again, we had one too many players. Again, someone was going to be left out. This time it was another kid. But then the older kid said, "Hey, don't leave. You can be the official cheerleader for both teams." And so began a tradition where no one was left out of the game. No one was rejected. Everyone either played the field or cheered from the sides.

Maybe it was because Jesus knew He would be the "stone the builders rejected" that made Him passionate about inclusion -- seeing Himself as the Good Shepherd who would not rest until the lost sheep was brought back.

You and I are both called to know and to be "Good Shepherds." The title is not limited to Jesus Christ alone, nor is limited only to popes, bishops and priests. It means each one of us who has responsibility over others: at work, at school, at play, even in the marketplace. Wherever the providence of God has put you, you are challenged to be a Good Shepherd to those around you. As a spouse, as a parent, as a grandparent, as a brother or sister, as a professional or semi-professional. People become good leaders based on their experiences, on what life teaches them in good times and in bad. Look into your heart on this Good Shepherd Sunday: Have you gained wisdom? Do you have a light you've been hiding under a bushel? Are you the leader we've been waiting for? AMEN! ALLELUIA!