

04/26/15 4 Easter B

-- *I am the good shepherd...* It's one of the most popular images of Jesus in the scriptures. Many people regard the 23rd Psalm, *The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want* as their favorite. But precisely due to its popularity, that image can be "domesticated" and lose its power.

-- What do I mean by that? Several things. For one, most of us have a "romantic" vision of sheep and the shepherd. But anyone who works with sheep knows they are smelly animals. And, in Jesus' day, the work was dangerous, with wolves and thieves and the like to contend with.

-- When Pope Francis said that his ministers should have the "smell of the sheep" he meant that we should be involved with our people, their problems and challenges. He doesn't want us sitting in some plush office or ivory tower giving out our orders.

-- For another thing, sheep need guidance. They need someone to lead in front of them or they can easily go astray. All of us need that type of guidance, including those who themselves are leaders. We may consider ourselves educated and that we have the answers, but God alone has the ultimate answers. We all have to be attentive to him.

-- And one other thing about our Good Shepherd: he has other tricks up his sleeve, so to speak. As he says, there are other sheep, not of this fold, that he must unite so that they become one flock.

-- God reaches out beyond the boundaries of the parish, the Church, the people we are "comfortable" with. God doesn't respect the lines of Church denominations, or the details of laws of one Church or another.

-- It's not that God thinks these are things we can ignore at will. It's that his will is more inclusive than our puny human minds and hearts.

-- And his love is fierce. God refuses to leave us out in the cold. God grieves when we try to exclude each other.

-- The gospel of the Good Shepherd occurs after the story of the man born blind, which we heard in Lent of last year. If you remember, Jesus

cured that man on a Sabbath, he came to believe in Jesus, and was thrown out of the synagogue by those who opposed Jesus.

-- But Jesus embraced him. He was the Good Shepherd who sought out the lost and hurting sheep. He refused to be bound by laws or attitudes that would limit his ability to heal the wounded.

-- Jesus reaches out to us when we are wounded. He reaches out to those who are rejected in our society and often in our churches. He desires that all of us share his love, for we are all children of God, as John says.

-- God has big plans in mind for all of us. He only asks us to be open to his life, to contemplate his word in scripture, and accept his work through the people we might least expect to show faith.

-- As Peter said, there is no salvation in anyone else but Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. Jesus alone can save us, and I have no trouble saying that to anyone, including (for example) my Muslim friends and colleagues.

-- But we do not know precisely how Jesus will do that, just as we don't know a lot about our future destination in heaven. We cannot impose limits on God's love and mercy by Church laws and regulations, as necessary as those laws might be.

-- After all, Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd. He laid down his life for us. He wants to unite us as one flock with one shepherd. Let's allow him to accomplish that work.