

This week after several attempts, Sarah and I celebrated as our 10-month-old Ezra finally answered our very important and theologically dense question, “Ezra, what does a sheep say?” He stopped, pondered the question and then answered with a resounding “Baaabaabaaa!” Sarah and I responded with clapping and simultaneous and jovial ‘Yay!’s. It was a joyous and holy moment. We were so proud of our son’s new, yet simple ability. I would be misleading you of Ezra’s ability, however, if I didn’t mention that Sarah and I had capitalized on ‘Baabaabaa’ being the only sound Ezra can consistently make. Nonetheless, it was all that he needed to follow our lead and know how to share in a very joyous moment. In like manner, today’s readings are all about sheep and shepherds. They call us to paradoxically become both a sheep in God’s flock and a shepherd of His flock. Like Ezra, we have already been given all we need in order to respond to God’s paradoxical call. Although we already possess all that is required to become both sheep and shepherd, it is not as easy as a simple ‘Baabaabaa.’ Instead, it requires us to envision abundant life and the courage to enact it. Let’s to our gospel reading from John.

In order to comprehend it, we have to look at the passage preceding it. There, at the end of John chapter 09, Jesus denounces spiritual blindness. This blindness is embodied by the Pharisees who say that they see the truth despite their sin remaining. In our reading, we see that anyone who attempts to enter the sheepfold (or the Kingdom of God) by any way other than the gate (Christ) embodies this spiritual blindness and is to be considered a thief and a bandit. A thief and a bandit who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy”. However, if anyone truly sees, they will enter the gate via Christ and “will be saved, have life, and have it abundantly.” Here, in verse ten, Jesus outlines the intended consequences of him being the good shepherd—life eternal. In the following passage, Christ articulates how and why he is in fact the good shepherd. He states, “The good shepherd lays down their life for the sheep.” He emphasizes this point further by juxtaposing the good shepherd with the hired hand. While the shepherd lays down their lives, the hired hand runs away when the wolf snatches and kills the sheep because the hired hand does not care for the sheep.

True to form, Jesus is using metaphor to emphasize spiritual truth. Like the hearers in our passage, it is easy to become confused. What is the sheepfold again? Who is the thief and bandit? What does the gate have to do the wolf and the good shepherd? And finally, what does this mean for us—those beginning to enter COVID-19’s valley of the shadow of death? From the beginning of our passage, it appears that Christ’s followers are a shepherd who enters the sheepfold through the gate (Christ), but also is a sheep who recognizes, follows, is saved by, and is led to abundant life *by* the Good Shepherd. This seems confusing. How can Christ followers be a shepherd and a sheep at the same time? How are we to be led while also being asked to lead? At the end of John’s gospel, Jesus emphasizes this confusing and simultaneous role of being led and being called to lead when he asks Peter three times if he loves him. When Peter responds three times saying ‘yes’, Jesus repeatedly commands Peter to “feed my sheep”. Their interaction ends by Jesus stating, “follow me.” Here, the gospel of John is demonstrating that to love and follow Jesus is to simply “feed his sheep.”

We must ask ourselves then, ‘who are the sheep and how do we feed them?’ As mentioned before, if we fail to do so, we are liable to be labeled by Christ himself as a thief, bandit, wolf, or a hired hand. In the passage following today’s gospel reading, Jesus answers that every person is a sheep in His flock. He states in verse 16, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.”

Ultimately, he declares that “there will be one flock, one shepherd.” This affirms Jesus as the Divine Shepherd portrayed in today’s psalter. Accordingly, all can read themselves and all of humanity into this famous psalm as the one who is left wanting nothing while in the valley of the shadow of death. Specifically, our Divine Shepherd provides food to eat, water to drink, restoration, and a path that glorifies the Lord our whole life long. In the midst of great suffering, we are left wanting nothing. In our current season, the season of Easter, we know this because our Divine Shepherd is simultaneously the paschal lamb. The good shepherd is the Divine shepherd because he humbled himself—even unto death. Thus, our confusing and simultaneous call to be a sheep and a Shepherd in fact embodies the way of Christ. Accordingly, in our being a sheep in the Divine Shepherd’s flock, today’s psalter provides the means to answer the question ‘how do we feed the sheep?’ As hopeful followers of Christ, our call to “feed the sheep” is a call to tend to one another and ensure that no one is left wanting anything—food, water, rest, or a path in life. Only then, as the gospel reading suggests will the sheep know the voice of God in and through us. Only then, as the psalter suggests, will goodness and mercy of our God follow us all our days.

However, loving God and God’s people so that no one is left in want is not as easy thing to do—especially when we are inheritors of an economic system that has placed productivity, personal gain, profit, and wealth above all else. Our capitalistic society has produced in us a prideful and greed-oriented lens to view all things—especially God and God’s people. In a month where we saw deaths at the hands of COVID-19 rise above 50,000 and record-breaking files for unemployment, we have also seen corporations choose bottom line over human lives. Protestors choose the life of the economy over the safety of their own lives and many millions of others. When I reflect on the American church, I cannot shake the verse in our gospel reading for today when it states that “they (the sheep) will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Here, Christ is explicitly denouncing the anti-Roman revolutionary movement that preceded him. They were thieves and bandits who made false messianic claims. The people did not listen or follow them because their words did not fall in line with their actions. In the American Church, our words and overemphasis on orthodoxy—or right belief—have had the same effect.

However, Christ does not command us to right belief, but to love and feed God’s people. Our overemphasis on orthodoxy falls deaf when in juxtaposition to the church’s orthopraxy—or right practice. When we look at the scriptures today we are confronted with two models for labor: the good shepherd and the hired hand. If we are to continue to be a church that emphasizes right belief, we first need to identify and lament how our practices reflects more the hired hand model for shepherding than the good shepherd. While the good shepherd protects all at all costs, the hired hand cares as far as they’re contractually obligated. Even if we put aside our inherited economic system that overemphasizes gain at all costs, it is difficult to love. Dorothy Day, the cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement articulates this point well when she states, “Love is not a sentimental thing, light, airy, romantic, and joyous. It is a matter of the will. “Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams.””¹ However, within our economic system Christ’s command to love by feeding all of His sheep seems especially difficult

¹ Dorothy Day, *Peter Maurin: Apostle to the World*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 116.

and a dreadful thing. In response, we search for the easiest and most reasonable excuses to dismiss Christ's commands.

A 19th century American philosopher claimed that this is because "We have grown literally afraid to be poor. We despise anyone who elects to be poor in order to simplify and save inner life. [And yet], the desire to gain wealth and fear to lose it are our chief breeders of cowardice and propagators of corruption...It is certain that the prevalent fear of poverty among the educated classes is the worst moral disease from which our civilization suffers."²

By collectively giving into a fear of being poor, we collectively pinpoint how we are hired hands and why strangers strain to hear the voice of God amongst us. And yet, we simultaneously know God chose to be God of all humanity. Through Christ's becoming the paschal lamb, we know that God loves and is with all of humanity. We know God hopes for the salvation of all. We know that followers of Christ ought not and "have no...right to set any limits to the loving God which has appeared in Jesus Christ."³ And yet, in our fear of being poor we have set limits to God's love and participated in the stealing and killing and destruction of others. That being the case, our final two readings from the New Testament provide us examples of churches that seek to be shepherds through a different economic approach to life. Let us turn to them to learn what it takes to love and feed the people of God.

In our readings from Acts of the Apostles and I Peter, we see church communities submitting to what Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin call a lifestyle of *voluntary poverty*. In Acts, we see the apostles loving Christ and practicing the paradoxical role of sheep and shepherd. They are *practicing resurrection*. They are surely thinking eternally and in light of Christ's giving of life abundantly. They are turning away from spiritual blindness and putting on the meekness of Christ. In verses 44 and 45 of our reading from Acts, it states "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." What a bold and courageous way to live. What a dreadfully scary proposal. What an embodiment of love. This is the blueprint for the church. And yet, this approach to following Christ and loving the people of God has long been abandoned, minimized, argued away, dismissed, ignored, ridiculed, and justified as too pie in the sky. However, in both Acts and I Peter, we hear of no one being left in want.

In light of this, it is apparent that we are fearful of such a life. Fearful of giving away what we have earned. Fearful of giving up what is ours. Gladly creating hell here and now for others while having our pie in the sky. We embody what G. K. Chesterton rightly articulates when he states, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." We see why this is especially true when we turn to our reading from I Peter. The writer commands the Christians in foreign land to "accept the authority of every human institution...honor everyone...honor the emperor." Instead of waging war against them and of the eternal soul, the writer calls the original hearers to be shepherds to everyone. Love everyone one and meet the needs of all. Only then, will Christians be able to "silence the ignorance of the foolish." The writer seems to know that waging war in the flesh is choosing to enact hell on earth. Here, it seems the writer is articulating "how to create a model of eternal community in

² Dorothy Day, *Peter Maurin: Apostle to the World*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 95.

³ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 62.

time.”⁴ The writer calls this early Christian community to what Maurin calls *communism*. A way of living that “leaves us the hope of getting our pie in the sky when we die without giving us hell here and now.”⁵ It is living in light of Christ’s promise of abundant life.

In a few moments, we will be stepping to the Lord’s table. In a sense, we will be bringing the Paschal Lamb into our bodies. But if all we do is receive Christ only to continue to pursue our personal or familial pie in sky in this life while others in our community continue to suffer—even those we would deem “foolish”—then we are not putting on Christ, but the thieves and robbers who participate in the stealing, death, and destruction of God’s people. Choosing to participate in enacting hell on earth. All the while, we have all we need to create heaven here on earth. In the coming months, we, like Ezra will have more and more opportunities to answer a question that we already possess the means to answer. Unlike Ezra, the question will not be “what does a sheep say?”, but rather “what does a sheep do?” Lord, in your mercy, may we have the imagination to see your truth, the courage to take on the worldly stupidity of Christ and take up your meek command to love and feed *all* of your sheep. Surely then will we find You and find ourselves wanting nothing, but having life in abundance. Amen.

⁴ Dorothy Day, *Peter Maurin: The Apostle to the World*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), xxvii.

⁵ Dorothy Day, *Peter Maurin: The Apostle to the World*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 156.