

## Easter 4 Year A 2011

This morning is often referred to as Good Shepherd Sunday. God the Good Shepherd is the one who knows us and cares for us and the one whose voice we are able to hear because we are called and led by name. I was reminded again of an “old, familiar image, a powerful one that for nearly a century has illustrated what was once a new, and amazing reality,” The Victrola. The Radio Corporation of America, or “RCA,” created a lasting logo: that figure of a dog sitting before a Victrola record player, staring in wonder at the speaker. The caption told it all: “He hears his master’s voice.” The faithful dog always hears the master’s voice.

So what about sheep? Today’s Gospel is about the sheep who hear the master’s voice. To Jesus and the people of his day, tending sheep was a familiar activity that meant many things. The shepherd led the sheep to good pasture, looked after the strays, exercised responsibility for protecting the sheep, served as midwife for birthing lambs, and then always paid special attention to them as the most vulnerable of the flock. The shepherd knew and valued the life of each of his sheep and was deeply devoted to his flock. At night, shepherds would herd their sheep into a common enclosure or sheepfold. The fold usually had a single entrance, and the owners of the flocks would take turns sleeping at the entrance to keep out

predators. In the morning the shepherds would lead their animals out to pasture, calling each sheep by name and piping or singing a tune. Each shepherd had a distinct call so the sheep would not follow a stranger but come only to the voice of its shepherd.

The Bible uses the metaphor of shepherd and sheep over and over again to describe the relationship between the faithful and God. Sheep are domesticated animals and they have none of the capabilities for self-defense or natural protection which wild animals have. A sheep cannot make it on its own because it needs the shepherd, who has raised and cared for it from birth. A sheep that imagines itself to be self-sufficient is indeed headed for trouble.

So how do you hear God's voice and remember that you're not self-sufficient? How do you acknowledge God's sacred presence and divine love in your life calling and leading you by name? Listen to this story from the Spiritual Writings of Leo Tolstoy and think about those questions.

There was a monk who was seeking salvation in the wilderness. He continually read his prayers and even got up twice a night to do so. A peasant used to bring him food. The monk started to wonder whether his way of life was holy enough, so he went to the saintly elder monk for guidance.

He told the elder monk about his life, his way of praying, the words of his prayers, his getting up at night to pray, and his

being fed by charitable offerings. He asked whether he was living right.

“All this is fine,” said the elder monk, “but go and see how the peasant who feeds you lives. Maybe you can learn something from him.”

The monk visited the peasant and spent a day and night with him. The peasant got up early and said only, “Lord.” He went to work and plowed the fields the whole day. At night he came home and again said, “Lord.” Then he lay down to sleep. The monk thought, “There is nothing I can learn here,” and wondered why the elder monk had sent him to the peasant.

He returned to the elder monk and told him, “The peasant hardly thinks about God—he mentions Him only twice a day.” So the elder monk told him, “Take this cup full of oil and walk around the village and come back here without spilling a drop.” The monk did what he was told.

When he returned, the elder monk asked him, “How many times did you think about God while you were carrying the cup?” The monk admitted that he did not think about God even once. He said, “I only thought about not spilling the oil.”

The elder monk said, “That little cup of oil kept you so preoccupied that you did not remember God even once. But the peasant fed himself, his family, and you with his labor and care and still remembered God twice a day.”

I find this story helpful because God's presence is there in the busyness of our daily activities. God's presence is also there in the midst of our quiet meditations and prayers. God's presence is with us waiting to be discovered in every time and place and our task is to remember. To remember especially that we are not self-sufficient. The Celtic people from whom our Christianity is deeply enriched had a name for being in those places of encounter with God's presence. They called them "thin places." They were places where the thin veil was lifted and this sense of being in God's presence was deeply known.

The Lord be with you.

Let us pray.

The Lord is the Good Shepherd patiently waiting for you to hear his voice. God be with you and grant you to stand in "thin places"

Where the Presence is deeply known and Mercy abounds and Wisdom flourishes. Amen.

—Celtic prayer.

*Excerpts taken from Synthesis*

