

+ In the Name of God, Holy, Living, and True

I have something to tell you. I heard the voice of a prophet on Market Street not long ago, a prophet proclaiming a very unwelcome truth... But on second thought, I can't tell you that story now, so let's leave it for later.

So let's start over... Good morning. Welcome to Good Shepherd Sunday. The Fourth Sunday of Easter every year takes up the theme of the Good Shepherd from the 10th chapter of John's Gospel. This is year A, so we heard the first part of the Good Shepherd discourse, in which Jesus sets up the contrast between the good shepherd and the other kind, and then goes on to talk about the difference between the sheep's relationship to each kind of shepherd, the good one and the other kind.

I would like to be a Good Homilist, and to do that, I need to talk about all the readings, at least give a quick-and-dirty overview. So let's look at them one by one.

So, OK, Acts: During Eastertide the first reading instead of being taken from the Old Testament is taken from the Acts of the Apostles. The probable reason for this is that the Acts readings show the spirit of the Church's life as told in some of the earliest narratives we have of it. Today's reading is the passage in Acts that follows immediately after the Pentecost narrative, and is therefore the first description in Acts of the early Christian community. Long story short: scholars, going on internal evidence, think Acts probably dates from between 70 and 89 AD. Acts may reflect the practices of Christian communities contemporary with its writing, or, as other scholars theorize, represents an idealized vision of the life of the Church in early apostolic times. The description of early Christians selling their goods and pooling their money for the community as a whole supports the idea that they were expecting the apocalyptic return of Jesus in their own near future. In today's selection of readings, this one seems to bear less relation to the Good Shepherd theme than the other readings.

Our second reading is taken from 1 Peter. Its references to persecutions suggest to scholars a probable date between 90 and 120

AD, sometime between the persecutions of the Emperor Domitian and those of Trajan. It is probably chosen for a place among today's readings because it makes reference to Christians that "were going astray like sheep, but now," under persecution, "have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

And the Psalm selected for this Sunday, Psalm 23, is the popular description of the reassurance and safety that comes from the care of the Good Shepherd. Yet, unlike the Gospel reading, the Psalm is all sweetness and light.

And then, in the Gospel reading, comes Jesus. Jesus with a very different tone, talking of thieves and bandits, stealing and killing and destroying his sheep. Thank you, Jesus! Thank you for the wake-up call, for stirring things up and making trouble. I can just see Jesus in my mind, saying "Hey, you know, that's what I do!"

I'm not surprised that Jesus doesn't want his sheep to fall asleep, to be lulled by the voice of the false shepherds. So the Gospel passage presents him at this most serious: In John's Gospel, the really important things Jesus says are always signaled by the same formula, Ἀμήν, ἀμήν, λέγω ὑμῖν. The Amen is not Greek, but related to the Hebrew word for truth, so "Very truly I tell you..." is the usual contemporary translation. This is a kind of "Yo! Listen up!" in John's New Testament Greek, a clear signal that he's about to tell us something that we really need to hear. Often Jesus follows this "Amen, Amen" by a statement beginning with the words "I AM...." And this "I AM" in John's Gospel reveals Jesus's identification with the saving works of Yahweh, the "I AM who AM."

In this tenth chapter of John, Jesus is quoted using the "Amen, Amen" introduction twice (once without, and once with an "I AM" statement following), but speaks the "I AM" a total of four times: twice in today's reading, in which he declares "I AM the door of the sheepfold," and twice in the following passage (which we will hear next year on Easter 4), in which he declares "I AM the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep."

So today, Jesus tells us that he is the door of the sheepfold, and by this is meant that he is the only safe way for the sheep to go in and

out of it – the only safe way, because those who “climb in by another way” are thieves and bandits. In fact, the word ληστῆς, usually translated “robber” or “bandit,” has a much stronger feel in Greek, more like “plunderer” or “pirate.” It has a connotation of extreme violence, not of simple robbery, but of stealing by means of killing and destruction.

We, the sheep, who know Jesus the shepherd’s voice, do not follow the false shepherds, who come to kill and destroy; instead, we flee from them, and rather follow Jesus who comes “that we may have life, and have it more abundantly.” And so the Gospel reading ends on a better note than it began.

So now, having bored you with Biblical exegesis, to be the Good Homilist, I have to say something about today, right now, and what these scriptures have to say to us about our own world in our own times.

And I have to tell you that I am very worried about the other kind of shepherds, the thieves and the plunderers, and how fewer and fewer sheep are listening to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and as a result are being plundered and destroyed.

I wonder, that even as the media tell us that America is proclaiming more and more its concern with morality and identifying as a Christian society, the voice of the Good Shepherd seems to be giving way to other voices. I see demands for harsher laws and more imprisonment. I see services for the neediest being cut back in the name of reducing taxes for the prosperous. I see concern for the poor turning into blaming the victims. And that causes me to wonder, which kind of shepherds have the ear of us American sheep.

I’m not talking about so-called Christian Conservatives. I believe they are being duped along with many others into supporting anti-Gospel values. What signs do I see?

Well, now I can tell you my strange experience that was the false start at the beginning of this talk. I heard the voice of a prophet on Market Street not long ago, a prophet proclaiming a very unwelcome truth... I was there a day or two before Easter doing some last-minute

shopping to help celebrate the Holiest of Holy Days, and as I came out of one of the stores, I saw a man, African-American, obviously very down-and-out by the look of his clothes and his lack of shoes, talking very loudly to no one in particular, or (I suspect) to everybody in general. As near as I can quote it, this is what he said:

“Welcome to San Francisco, folks. Welcome all you tourists and visitors. Be happy and spend your money. Leave your money here and go home happy. You’re safe here. No danger of political revolution here; this is America. It’s all about money. America is bought and paid for. No revolution. That’s it. Shop, shop, shop till you drop!”

Most people ignored him; some gave a sly smile or even laughed. But as for me, I have to say, this was no joke – it had been a long time since I felt so chastened.

In the days that followed, those words, or parts of them started to work on other stuff I had been thinking about. For example, budget cuts to City College where I work teaching English to immigrants. Plans for next semester after the State budget cuts are in place: out of 130 faculty retiring at the end of this semester, our Chancellor is talking about not backfilling 100 of those positions, and canceling hundreds of class sections as a result. In addition, one proposal would raise tuition almost threefold for California residents in community colleges, resulting in a full-time student fee of \$990 per semester. And that on the poorest of post-secondary students, the ones in need of basic English, basic skills remediation, and technical skills to be employable in any decent job. No talk of a tax increase on the wealthy; just a tripled fee increase on the poor, those least able to pay . So I think to myself: Is this the voice of the Good Shepherd, or the plundering of the sheep?

The students who can’t pay that tripled fee have very few other options. They can go to one of the new for-profit two-year private school programs. These are becoming the free-market competition for the traditional state-funded community colleges. The tuition is very steep, \$15,000 to \$30,000 a year; but these schools facilitate Pell Grants and Federally-insured student loans for the those who want to apply. Here’s how it works: These for-profit schools have used incentive-based recruiters to sign up low income and minority

students, almost none of whom have any previous college study experience. Incentive-based recruiting for schools was outlawed in 1992, but the Bush administration generously opened some loopholes in the law, to allow private enterprise schools to continue it. The Obama administration recently closed these loopholes, but in the meantime, tens of thousands of students were signed up by recruiters getting paid incentive rewards by the head for new students. Once recruited, and financed through Federal money, the students are often placed in computer-based classes. These classes don't require attendance at set times, which is attractive to students, many of whom have variable work schedules or children to care for. They can do their lessons at any time; but on the other hand, they have no access to tutoring or homework help because of the on-line set-up. They hardly ever see a professor or the inside of a classroom. As a result of this system, only about one-third of the students graduate. The other two-thirds are completely unprepared for college-level work and lack the requisite study skills and understanding of the rigors of the grading system. The schools set up the loans and retain the students for as long as possible, and when two-thirds of the sheep (excuse me, the students) flunk out, the schools have already taken the Federal dollars (your tax dollars) and left the students with no degree, no job placement, and saddled with tens of thousand dollars in loan debt which they have no way to repay. Free enterprise triumphs for the investors who rake off the profits. And I think again: Is this the voice of the Good Shepherd, or the plundering of the sheep? [Bloomberg News investigative reporter Daniel Golden. He shared the George Polk Award for educational reporting for a series on this subject.]

And those who don't even go to these schools, what happens to them? Where do the unemployable poor and minority youth who can't negotiate even the for-profit system go for an education? I'll tell you. They go into the streets; there too many of them get involved in petty crime out of feelings of alienation and marginalization, or just out of the need to survive. Then they go to prison. Prisons have great retention rates, I'll tell you, better than any other school. With the long mandatory sentences that the politicians and the public clamor for (which tax-payers underwrite to the tune of \$55,000/year/prisoner), this is the most expensive education option for the taxpayer. But we get a lot for our money. These students graduate

with an unofficial degree in crime and a broken spirit and a sense of desperation I can't even describe, brutalized, even less employable with a criminal record. Less employable at anything, that is, except more crime. Again, your tax dollars at work, often going to private contractor corporations that administer more and more prisons for profit every year. And again I think: Is this the voice of Good Shepherd, or the plundering of the sheep?

I wrote something on the Web about prisons eventually getting more money than schools, and a professor in Germany who sometimes reads my blogs saw it and sent me the title of a very interesting book written by a French sociologist, currently a Distinguished Fellow at UC Berkeley. The title is particularly telling. *Punishing the Poor: The Neo-Liberal Government of Social Insecurity*. [Loïc Wacquant, Professor of Sociology and Research Associate at the Institute for Legal Research, Boalt Law School, University of California at Berkeley] I don't think I need to say too much about it; the title pretty much says it all.

That's how the state and the for-profit systems hide their failures: in prisons. Failures caused by social insecurity for the least able citizens: by drastically reduced social and low-cost health services, by allowing, for example, California to become 46th out of fifty states in per-pupil spending on education, by the dumbing down of the poorest and least educated to get them to acquiesce in their own oppression. Is that the voice of the Good Shepherd, or the plundering of the sheep?

In the United States, the incarceration rate (according to the latest available data) is the highest of any country in the world, six times higher than our neighbor Canada, namely 743 out of every 100,000 inhabitants, or 2.25 million souls in prison. Seventy percent of them African American or Latino; in Federal prisons, those groups account for 91%. Think that's high? It's just the tip of the iceberg: if you count all those in the criminal justice system, including those on probation and parole, the number is not 2.25 million, but 7.25 million. Out of the 2010 census population of 308 million American men, women, and children, that's one person out of every 42 in this country in the criminal justice system. The voice of the Good Shepherd, or the plundering of the sheep?

We hear that budgets are too high, that they need to be cut. Taxes need to be reduced. There's no more money for government spending. Really? While the average income of California's top 400 earners is \$345 million dollars? Let me make that clear: \$345 million is the average per individual. Let's do the math; that's 400 people earning a total of 138 billion dollars in California. There's no more source of tax revenue in California? If those four hundred paid 1% more in tax, barely noticeable at their income level, that alone would restore the \$1.4 billion dollar cuts to postsecondary education the Governor is projecting. That could mean not turning away 20,000 students from the UC system next year, not tripling community college fees and not sending that life-line system into a downward funding spiral.

But never mind individual taxpayers. In the ongoing Federal budget debates, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont read a list of the top ten biggest tax avoiders among corporations. Corporations that made billions or tens of billions in net profit and still managed to get refund credits from the IRS. Just two examples: Exxon Mobil made \$19 billion in profits in 2009 and not only paid no federal income tax, but received a \$156 million tax rebate, according to its own SEC filings. Bank of America received a \$1.9 billion tax refund from the IRS last year, although it made \$4.4 billion in profits. This is the same BofA that received a bailout from the Federal Reserve and the Treasury Department of nearly \$1 trillion. The voice of the Good Shepherd, or the plundering of the sheep?

We hear repeated over and over that the poor are poor because they are lazy. That most people on welfare are cheats. The voice of the Good Shepherd, or blaming the plundered sheep for their own victimization?

The super-rich and corporations gobble up money and resources while recklessly despoiling the environment, and pay proportionately very little in taxes to maintain the physical and social infrastructure which makes their riches possible. We hear that they are patriots and deserve our thanks for creating jobs. Is that the voice of the Good Shepherd, or of the plunderers of the sheep?

Whose voice moves and sways us in America today? Are the poor

having life more abundantly, or are they being plundered? And maybe not just the poor...

What do the Gospels tell us Jesus has to say about this? Let's see... Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God... Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and every sort of corruption...

The Gospels show us Jesus as not having a very high regard for either the wealthy or the religious authorities of his day. Nowhere does the Scripture say that these were the robbers and plunderers of the sheepfold. But oddly enough, the Gospel reading for today comes immediately after a dispute with the Pharisees over Jesus's healing of a blind man.

So I'll end where I began: I heard the voice of a prophet on Market Street the other day, a prophet proclaiming a very unwelcome truth... bought and paid for, caught in a wheel of consumerism, in which we both consume and are consumed, ourselves, commodified, like articles of commerce.

Tell me: What do I do about it? What do we do?