

But I don't know. It seems to me the sheep knew the voice of the car driving, rock music blaring, cigarette smoking, shepherd. They had no problem following him to green pastures. He didn't abandon the sheep when they got into a place of danger. He got them to safety. Maybe shepherds aren't supposed to be clean and soft, as the sheep are often in places where there is dirt and brush. Maybe a good shepherd isn't afraid to get dirty, if that's what it takes to care for his sheep.

I happen to follow a sweet Twitter account called Cat Shepherd, which is about a cat named Bodacious who lives on a farm in Ireland and seems to enjoy watching over the sheep, especially the lambs. The pictures tweeted by Bodacious often show the cat in the middle of a muddy path and the farmer certainly has some dirt under her nails. It seems those who spend time with sheep will get a little dirty. Yet it is obvious from the pictures on Twitter, that this cat shepherd cares for her sheep, and does her daily rounds with due diligence even in bad weather, making sure her sheep have clean water to drink, green pastures to graze in, and that they take their medicine when required, even if it does get her paws dirty.

For those of us who are not often exposed to real live shepherds, whether they are male, female, or feline, perhaps we can understand Mary's surprise and shock at seeing a shepherd that looked and acted very different than what she had imagined a shepherd to be like. It can be too easy to let images define a shepherd, or at least Jesus as the good shepherd, but to do so may lead us astray from what Jesus was trying to say when he called himself the good shepherd.

Shepherds were a strong symbol for people of Jesus' day, especially for the Jewish people. Remember Moses was working for his father-in-law Jethro as a shepherd when he met God in the burning bush. Before he was a king, David was shepherd. Scholars and commentators remind us speaking of a leader of the Israelite people as a shepherd was a way of talking about their king, for a good king should care about the people he rules over the way a shepherd cares for their flock of sheep. By calling himself a good shepherd, Jesus may have been saying he cares for his flock. He isn't going to abandon the flock when it is threatened, and he isn't going to do anything that would intentionally harm it. That is how people will know he is the Messiah, by his loving care, which might be evidenced by dirt under his own nails.

Too often, I wonder if we get distracted with images of the good shepherd, like Mary, that we can hear today's Gospel and start to focus on what makes a good shepherd and then look with suspicion at what we decide is nothing more than a hired hand and warn each other to stay away from such greedy individuals. Or maybe we try to fashion ourselves as shepherds, sometimes ordained leaders of churches can be guilty of this and try to follow Jesus' lead and be good shepherds ourselves. But I don't believe the author of John was trying to use Jesus' words to establish a

hierarchy for church leadership, and I am not sure it is good to try and interpret this passage in such a way.

Especially because to do so misses something important in today's Gospel: the sheep that Jesus said are not part of the flock yet. Notice Jesus did not say other shepherds were to bring these sheep to the flock. Neither were the sheep. Only Jesus, the good shepherd, will be the one who will bring all his sheep together, whoever they are, wherever they are.

Which makes me wonder if today's Gospel is not a periscope that is supposed to make shepherds out of us, as much as it is to remind us of who our shepherd is. No matter our gender, our identity, our race, our age, our orientation, our economic security, our politics, our status in the church or other institutions, we all follow the same Good Shepherd, Jesus.

Does that mean all we have to do is graze in whatever our equivalent is of green pastures? Or find comfort in times of trouble or when we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death? The answer to these questions can be found in the other readings from today. That answer is No. Our role as members of Jesus' flock isn't just to enjoy the safety or comfort of a clean, soft, shepherd. Our role is to live into the salvation the dirty man who died on the cross and rose with the marks of that cross gives us.

Our role is to be in this world, but not of this world. To learn how to be part of a flock that loves the good shepherd, that welcomes the newcomer and the visitor, that shares the good things we have been given, and most importantly, gives credit not to our own efforts, or that of any ordained minister past or present, be they bishop, priest, or deacon, but to Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Perhaps that is one of the most important parts of today's lessons for us. That when we engage in ministry that exemplifies the care and compassion of Jesus we need to give credit to Jesus. And here is one reason why I believe this.

Back in the late 1940s-early 1950's according to your parish history, Bishop Hobson had a vision for campus ministry that included this very parish. With the help of the bishop and other members of the diocese, this building was built on land purchased with the help of the diocese so that you could be a particular kind of presence for the community of Ohio University. And this is what you have done. And you have done it very well. You do love and care for your community. For many years it was easy to do; as fraternities and sororities would bring you students to help fill these pews every Sunday morning because they were teaching them going to church is just part of good citizenship. Those in important positions at the university attended and gave generously, which helped the budget, simply because at the time, it was understood to be part of good citizenship.

I don't have to tell you times have changed. A recent survey by the Barna group, which has interviewed hundreds of thousands of individuals over the past twenty or more years, has been reporting that people in their late teens and early twenties are no longer going to church nor want much to do with the institutional church. David Kinnaman, the president of Barna group has recently published a book about this and has spoken about how religion is now seen as no longer being relevant to that age group. And as someone who meets lots of people, I can say his research reflects what I experience only not just with people in their early twenties. I find the belief that religion is irrelevant in people of all ages, even when it comes to doing good works. While I find reading the results of this research helpful in understanding the modern world, others can become disheartened by it. It is a hard thing to hear and face, I understand that.

But I do find hope in this research, because I see an opportunity for all followers of Jesus, and especially for Church of the Good Shepherd here in the heart of Ohio University. We can be proud of our ministries that do strive to offer if not green pastures, then a hot healthy meal, and good coffee, and a place of welcome and rest and peace in the midst of a busy university. And we can and should celebrate these and all our ministries, which I believe we will do with cake later at coffee hour.

But we can also remember on this Good Shepherd Sunday to give the credit for all of this to Jesus, so that those who believe religion and church to be irrelevant, judgmental, and homophobic, can have the opportunity to see that we may not be perfect, but what good we do, we do because of our Good Shepherd, Jesus. We don't do good because we are good, but because Jesus is good, and it is that connection to Jesus that brings us all a little closer to something bigger than ourselves and something better than we can create on our own, but is still something we are a part of, and "they" whoever "they are" are certainly welcome to be part of too. This is another aspect of ministry in the 21st century and is loving challenge to the idea that religion is not necessary.

Our mission, given to us by someone who followed the same Good Shepherd, continues to be joyful and challenging, hopeful and heartening, despite occasional disappointments. It gives us the opportunity to follow Jesus while showing the world the Good Shepherd who may not fit the stained-glass image, who might smell of onions or coffee, but who is love and cares for us all. And we can be grateful to Jesus, who brings us all together to share in worship, prayer and mission of the Church of the Good Shepherd in this day and time. I for one am grateful and so very glad to be part of the flock.