

Homily Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 30, 2023 Good Shepherd Sunday

There is the story of the mother who decided to give her little boy a leadership opportunity. The family had invited guests over for Sunday lunch, right in the middle of the summer. "Johnny," she said, "why don't you lead us in our prayer before we eat?" Johnny decided at that time he'd put on a bashful face, and he declined. "I don't know how," he said. "Oh, yes you do," said the mother. "Why don't you just say what you've heard me say?" Johnny prayed: "O God, why did we have to invite these people over on a day like today?"

Today is often called Good Shepherd Sunday, when we reflect on Jesus as the Good Shepherd and this leads us to know how we are called to live our lives.

In the Old Testament, if you think of a shepherd, you think of a man who spends his whole life with his sheep, taking care of them, raising them, loving them, healing them and, most of all, protecting them from all harm. That's the real meaning of a shepherd.

One of the reasons that the Jewish people love shepherds so much is because they understood that God Himself was their shepherd. God said to Ezekiel, "I am tired of you shepherds. I am going to take my own sheep and shepherd them myself because you neglect them, you don't care for them, you don't love them, you don't take care of them, and so, one day, I will send a shepherd and he will be God Himself."

And so it didn't surprise anyone, because the founder of the Jewish people, the chosen people of God, was Abraham and, of course, Abraham was a shepherd. David was a shepherd. In Israel, their leaders were all shepherds. And so it has a very unique and very important meaning.

But the idea of a shepherd comes to a new understanding when God stands before His people and when Jesus says these sacred words: "I am the shepherd." Not a shepherd, not will become a shepherd. "I am the shepherd. My sheep know me and I know my sheep, and I give my sheep life, life itself."

Why do we need something like that kind of help? Have you ever been looking for direction and meaning in your life?

A story. There was an elderly man whose face had life written all over it. He sat drinking tea as he reflected on his life:

When I was young, I was full of fire and I wanted to awaken everyone. I prayed for enough strength to change the world.

In midlife, I awoke one day to realize my life was half over and I had changed no one. I prayed for strength to change those close around me, who so much needed it.

And now, here I am a very old man, and my prayer today is very simple. I pray for the strength to at least change myself.

In life we must learn to first assemble the inner, then the outer.

We must first acknowledge the important rather than the insignificant.

We must recognize the great rather than the trivial.

We must first lead ourselves, and then, only then can we lead others.

For us as Christians, prayer and discernment is the way that enables us to lead ourselves.

Who am I? Until you identify your authentic self, it is difficult to effectively lead. When you make a conscious commitment to know yourself, develop yourself, learn about yourself, you are allowing yourself to change step by step. Knowing yourself is a process that can only take place internally.

What is my purpose? There is an amazing sense of empowerment that comes when you identify what you are meant to do. It grows out of learning what matters most to you. Once you have it, it provides direction and focus, it brings clarity, it establishes goals. It helps you achieve results and stay connected to meaningful thought and action.

As a pastor one of my joys is to help people find their purpose and place. We are fortunate to be in a very diverse church when it comes to spiritual practices and ways of life. We have Franciscans and Jesuits, charismatics and contemplatives, newlyweds and senior couples, religious and diocesan priests. The goal each of us must have is to support each other wherever we find God's grace and are able to live it out in our lives. Internal peace is the sign we are in the right place.

As Michael Jackson sang, if you want to make this world a better place, take a look at yourself and make the change. Who you are going to be is rooted in your talents and skills and fuelled by your passion.

The only place you can truly create change is within you. The essence of leadership is not in telling others what to do, but in being your best self and inspiring those around you to do the same.

Most of us want to make the world a better place. To do so, we must start within ourselves, where we are, making one change at a time, and we must not stop reflecting until we are done.

Today we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday. As we celebrate who Jesus is for us, let us open our hearts to let Him lead us into being the people we were made to be: His beloved sons and daughters of God. Then we will lead others to know the Good Shepherd who loves us beyond our imagining.