

May 11 & 12, 2014
Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Good Shepherd Sunday/Mothers Day

Timmy was a shy little boy, not very popular with the other children in the first grade, who stayed pretty much to himself. As Valentine's Day approached, his mother was delighted when Timmy asked her one evening to sit down and write out all the names of the children in his class so that he could make a Valentine for each one. Slowly he remembered each name aloud and his mother recorded them on a piece of paper. He worried endlessly that he might forget someone.

Armed with a book of Valentines to cut out, scissors and crayons and paste, he carefully worked his way down the list. When each one was finished, his mother printed the name on the piece of paper and watched him carefully copy it. As the pile of finished Valentines grew so did Timmy's satisfaction

But it was about this time that Timmy's mother began to worry whether the other children would make Valentines for him. How absolutely horrible it would be if Timmy went off to the party with 37 tokens of love and no one remembered him. She wondered if there was some way she could sneak a few Valentines into the ones he was making so that he would be sure of receiving at least a few.

But Timmy watched his pile of cards so closely and counted them so lovingly that there was no chance to slip in an extra, so she assumed a mother's most normal role, that of *'patient waiting'...*

The day of the Valentines party finally arrived and mom watch Timmy trudged down the snowy street with a box of heart-shaped cookies in one hand and a shopping bag in the other with the 37 tokens of his labor. She watched him with a burning heart: "Please God," she prayed, "let him get at least a few!"

All afternoon her hands were busy here and there, but her heart was at the school. At 3:30, she took her knitting and sat in her chair with a full view of the street. Finally Timmy appeared, coming up the street, alone – turning every once in a while to back up a few steps into the wind. She strained her eyes to see his face... at that distance; it was just a rosy blur.

It wasn't until he started coming up the walk that she saw it – the one lone Valentine clutched in his little red mitten – only one... after all his work and... probably, from the teacher. Her heart sank, the knitting blurred before her eyes. "If only you could stand between your child and life."

"If only you could stand between your child and life..."

She lay down her work and walked to meet him at the door.

"What rosy cheeks!" she said, "Here, let me untie your scarf. Were the cookies good?"

Timmy turned toward her with a face shining with happiness and complete fulfillment: "Do you know what? I didn't forget one; not a single one!"

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My sisters and brothers, as our church liturgical calendar continues our celebration of Easter, this 4th Sunday is traditionally called 'Good Shepherd Sunday,' as our readings refer to God as The Good Shepherd... and Jesus as our Good Shepherd.

Preparing for my homily for this Mother's Day weekend, it struck me that the many wonderful ways to describe God as a good Shepherd could also be used to describe God as a good Mother.... and that image of God as mother, is one with which we can all identify.

My brothers and sisters, shepherding is about caring – especially for those who are weak, little, lost, in need. Shepherding is about presence, love, support... Like a mother...

Isaiah reveals that God "will feed the flocks like a Shepherd. God will gather the lambs in God's arms and carry them in God's bosom and gently lead those who are young..." Like a mother...

In today's gospel: The Shepherd calls the sheep by name, goes before them, they know the Shepherd's voice... Like a mother...

And, of course our favorite Psalm 23, reveals a tender and compassionate God:

"God is my shepherd, I shall not want; in verdant pastures God gives me rest; beside restful waters God leads me..." Sheep will not drink from running water; a *good* shepherd will find "restful," still waters for the flock!

"God refreshes my soul, even if I walk in the deadly valley..." Among the hillsides of Palestine were deep ravines in which wolves roamed waiting for sheep to fall or wander in, a *good* shepherd always had a long hooked staff with which to lift the 'lost' sheep out of the ravine!

"You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes..." A *good* shepherd would always go before the flock into the pasture and pull-up the poisonous plants that would make the sheep sick if they ate them!

"You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows..." At the end of the day, when leading the sheep to the sheep-gate for the night, a *good* shepherd would douse the sheep in a pool of water to cool them off after the heat of the day; and then carefully check them for any cuts and scratches which they would anoint with oil to sooth any discomfort.

In today's Gospel, Jesus said: "I am the door, I am the gate..." At night, sheep would be enclosed in something like a corral. A *good* shepherd would sleep at the gate – guarding the sheep from dangerous animals or thieves that would try to enter during the night.

"I fear no evil for You are at my side with your rod and staff that give me courage." A *good* shepherd ... like a mother....

In our story of Timmy and his Valentines: "Timmy's mother began to worry..."

"She watched him with a burning heart..."

"Please God," she prayed, "let him get a few..."

"Her heart was at the school..."

"Her heart sank..."

"If only you could stand between your child and life..."

My brothers and sisters, on this Mother's Day weekend – this Good Shepherd Sunday – we have two beautiful images of God on which to reflect: a good Shepherd and a loving mother.

We might ask ourselves: Do these two images of God connect with our own image of God? Certainly, these images are in stark contrast to the image of God as a tall white man with a long beard, holding the commandments on a stone Tablet on the day of final judgment – ready to evaluate whether we're heading for heaven or hell....!

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As humans we are all created in the image and likeness of God; and so, we are all called to roles of leadership...

Obviously, parents are called to feed and clothe, care-for, love and protect their children; all of us in life at one time or another in need of spiritual guides: shepherds or mother's who show us the way to grow in inner freedom. I recall early in my priesthood, a time when I was going through a difficult period. I called Christ the King Retreat House and got connected with Jesuit Father Paul Curtain, who some of you may remember. For the next 10 years, Paul was my spiritual guide, a good shepherd to me.

Young adults need models to help them as they grow and to make good choices. Often friends will at times be a shepherd, a mother, for one another. In the workplace, we are often called to positions of leadership....

As we reflect on the image of God as Shepherd, God as mother, we might reflect a bit on how we are living out our particular role as shepherds, as nurturers, as servant leaders.

Good Shepherd Sunday is also a time to reflect on the shepherds of our Church:

Much of Pope Francis' first year has been focused on challenging shepherds of our church to follow the Good Shepherd in their role of shepherding the people. At the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday last year, Pope Francis, addressing the world's priests, stated: "This is what I'm asking you: be shepherds with the smell of sheep!" In one of his meditations on the Church, our Pope calls us all to be shepherds... Our parish – every parish – could reflect on these words:

"May the church be the place of God's mercy and love, where everyone can feel themselves Welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live according to the Good News of the Gospel.... To make others feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged. The church must have open doors so that all may enter."

Speaking to bishops, Pope Francis stated:

"You should be gentle, patient and merciful – animated by inner poverty, the freedom of the Lord, outward simplicity and austerity of life. You should not have the psychology of princes."

Speaking to leaders of religious orders of men about the rigidity and narrowness of some of our younger clergy today he stated:

“Formation of priests is a work of art; not a police action. We must form their hearts. Otherwise we’re creating little monsters, and these little monsters mold the people of God. This really gives me goose-bumps.”

And Pope Francis, in his interview with the Jesuit editors, uses the two images reflected on this morning (You’d think he had read my Homily!) “I dream of a church that is a mother and shepherdess. The Church’s ministers must be merciful, take responsibility for the people and accompany them like the Good Samaritan who washes, cleans and raises-up his neighbor. This is pure gospel...”

In conclusion, on this Mother’s Day weekend, I will share a few words of Pope Francis’ reflection on Mary, the “Mother of the church,” from his exhortation The Joy of the Gospel (¶288):

“Whenever we look to Mary, we come to believe once again in the revolutionary nature of love and tenderness. In her we see that humility and tenderness are not virtues of the weak but of the strong, who need not treat others poorly in order to feel important themselves...”

“We implore her maternal intercession that the church may become a home for many peoples, a mother of all peoples and that the way be opened to the birth of a new world. It is the risen Christ who tells us: “Behold: I make all things new!” With Mary may we advance confidently towards the fulfillment of this promise.”

Amen!