

The martyr shepherd



Good Shepherd Sunday is not for the faint of heart.

Sure, it's consoling to contemplate Jesus as the shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep. He finds us caught in the thistles of our wayward hearts, lifting us up and taking us home to safety.

But a close reading of the Gospel of John will demonstrate to us the nature of the shepherd's sacrificial love.

The passage from John begins innocently enough.

Jesus proclaims himself as the Good Shepherd, one who takes upon himself risk in guarding his sheep.

He is not the shepherd who will run as fast as his legs carry him when there is a threat to the flock.

Yet this Good Shepherd does more than risk his life for his sheep. He actively lays down his life so that his sheep may live.

[Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 22, 2018](#)

ACTS 4:8-12

PS 118:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28, 29

1 JN 3:1-2

JN 10:11-18

In the joy of the Easter season, we may forget too easily that Christ's resurrection is linked closely to his death – a death that Peter reminds us has been caused by Israel's hardness of heart: "He is 'the stone rejected by you, the builders, which

has become the cornerstone'" (Acts 4:11).

Of course, it's not just Israel's hardness of heart that's the problem. It's ours! It's our refusal to accept the Good Shepherd's absolute love.

Jesus then contrasts his own love with that of a hired hand who has no particular affection for his sheep. When the wolf comes to threaten the sheep, the hired hand flees.

The hired hand does not recognize the sheep. Such a passage should concern us.

Are we not often more like the hired hand, refusing to give up our comfort to imitate the tender affection of the Good Shepherd?

When we meet those in need of love, caught in the thistles of sin and death, do we run forth like Christ? Or do we scatter to the winds worried about our own comfort?

The Good Shepherd, though, doesn't leave us even in our hardness of heart: "I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (Jn 10:14-15).

Note that Jesus' love for his sheep comes from the knowledge he has of the Father. To know the Father, for Jesus, is to love the Father. It is to give one's life fully over in love as the beloved Son.

Jesus knows us in the same way that he knows the Father. He holds nothing back, but gives everything to us: "He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1).

This love was not merely reserved for those sheep in the fold. It is a love that goes out drawing each and every person to the Father: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" (Jn 12:32).

The love of the Good Shepherd, revealed upon the cross, is

meant for every human being. All are meant to belong to the sheepfold.

And we, beloved sons and daughters of God, are sheep of this very Good Shepherd.

But that's not it. There's more. We hear in 1 John:

"Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed ... when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2).

The love of the Good Shepherd. The love that the Son has for the Father. The love he has for us.

One day, we'll see this love.

We'll become this love.

After all, Good Shepherd Sunday isn't for the faint of heart.

Timothy P. O'Malley, Ph.D., is the managing director of the McGrath Institute for Church Life.