

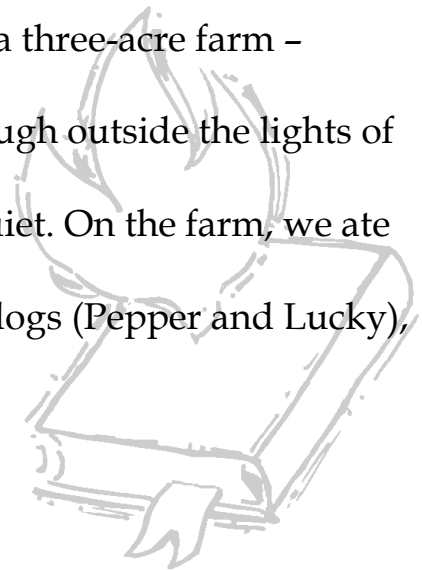
Homily
4th Sunday of Easter – C

Rev. Peter G. Jankowski
May 11-12, 2019

Acts 13: 14, 43-52
Ps 100: 1-2, 3, 5
Rv 7: 9, 14-17
Jn 10: 27-30

What I am about to share with you is a homily I first almost twenty years ago. Ever since I first preached this homily, it has become the catalyst for many of my first communion sermons I have preached ever since. For my own faith life, I am amazed at how a story from my youth resonates for me even today and serves as a catalyst for what I do for all of you good folks as your pastor and shepherd, hopefully even sometimes a good one...

Sometime around the mid to last 1970s, my life in Sandwich, Illinois could not have been any better as a kid with no worries in the world. During my formative lives, my family lived on a three-acre farm – nothing spectacular but certainly enjoyable enough outside the lights of a big city and exposed to fresh air and lots of quiet. On the farm, we ate fresh eggs from the chicken, we had two great dogs (Pepper and Lucky),



my dad raised bees for the 100 pounds of honey we would cultivate each year, and we had lots and lots of space to roam around without a care in the world (in addition, we had the best county fair in the country that took place less than a mile from where I lived).

As it would happen in the late 1970s, one of the local farmers presented us with a wonderful gift, a baby lamb that was rejected by her mother and in desperate need of care. If you know anything about sheep, if one of a mother's offspring acquires a unique smell or some characteristic different from the rest of the family, the mother will often discard the baby lamb and separate it from all of the others. In this case, our neighboring farmer raised thousands of lambs a year and could not give this particular one all the attention it deserved, so our neighbor friend gifted us with this one baby lamb. Because we did not have a very big farm, we were able to care for this one with great diligence.

So our family took on the task of raising this cast-off lamb. I remember how, in preparing for this gift, my dad took this big

cardboard box and filled it with straw and then placed this newborn in this new home so that we all could raise this lamb as if it were part of the family. I used to love caring for this lamb every day in the back porch. I loved to feed it bottled milk. I loved to take the lamb for a walk. The only thing I didn't like to do was clean the lamb. And clean it. And clean it...

We even gave a name to the lamb - EWE (the name for a female sheep - pronounced "YOU"), as in "Hey, EWE, get over here," or "Hey EWE, it's time to eat." We loved that baby lamb!

As the years passed, EWE got older and EWE moved out of the house. But I never forgot about EWE. None of my God-centered family ever did. From the minute EWE entered our house, no matter what happened, we cared for EWE because EWE became part of our family. And it is that lesson that EWE taught me. As much as EWE showed me how to care, I learned my lesson and did the same for others.

Think about it. That is the gospel message. Christ brings the gift of EWE into the hearts of every person in the world. That's what makes EWE special. Let us never forsake the lambs of the world. Let them become just as special as EWE.

What I have just described, by the way, is not just a story about a baby lamb - it is also about all of us. Think about the way we gather around a baby when he or she is born and take care of this very tiny, precious child. Think about the way we gather around a loved one at a funeral and remember how important this person was in our life. In general, think about the times we come to celebrate milestones in people's lives, whether it be a birthday, anniversary, first communion, or the like. The emotions are very high during these times and we draw ourselves closer to the ones we love because of it.

As I reflected on the scripture readings this week, I had the same feelings about the Lord, who serves as the Good Shepherd to all of us, a group of vulnerable sheep in need of a guide in the world of faith. Here

you have our Lord who has given us everything, who has revealed himself about as fully as one can. And those who follow the Lord will receive the greatest gift that one can ever possess – the gift of eternal life. We read in the book of revelation that those who follow the Lord will never hunger or thirst, will never be in darkness but bathed in the light of the Lord. We also read in Acts that those who do not follow the path shown to them will find their way to salvation very difficult.

One of the great scripture scholars of this century, Fr. Raymond Brown, tells us that the gospel passage calls us to focus our eyes on the good shepherd, to become mesmerized by the love of this shepherd in our lives, that we all are called to be good shepherds in today's age, to take care of the lambs in our fold, to take care of *ewe... or YOU!!!* The focus of the gospel reading is to learn what it means to be a good shepherd by following the example of the greatest good shepherd we have ever encountered, the one named Jesus. When we show our love for the shepherd, he will care for us with great love and we respond to that love by doing the same for others in need of the same mercy.

All throughout this week, I have been awed by this theme. The readings during the weekday masses have focused on the bread of life, the food for our lives. Later this month, we are going to celebrate the lives of two wonderful shepherds who guided the Church during some of the most tumultuous moments of Church history.

Later this month, we celebrate the feast of Catherine of Sienna, a Dominican Saint of the fourteenth century, the last of twenty-five children (how many mothers would want to have twenty-five children in their house? Not me.) Here was a woman who, at the age of twelve, had decided to devote her life to God, to become mesmerized by his love. Her parents were not happy with this decision and decided to do everything possible to stop her intentions. But Catherine was determined to follow her call and in the end, became one of the great spiritual leaders of the fourteenth century. Her piety was so great that she was able to influence Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon, France where the popes were kept safe for seventy years when Rome was seen as a place in which it was not safe to live. Saint Catherine convinced

Pope Gregory that Mother Church needed their Vicar for Christ to return back home to lead the Church back where he belonged.

Later on this month we also celebrate the feast of St. Pius V, a man who became pope about five years after the Council of Trent in the 16th century. Pius V lived in a very turbulent period of Church history during the height of the Protestant Reformation, a time when abuses in the Church were out of control and those who protested these abuses caused the leaders of the church to make significant reforms. The abuses were so bad at the time that it would be like me telling you that you would have to pay \$100 to come to mass or \$50 to hear a confession.

Throughout his papacy, St. Pius V devoted his ministry to implementing these corrections made by the Council of Trent and correcting the abuses going on in the Church (among other things). Despite the hostile opposition that faced him by the Protestant Reformers and even among some within the Catholic faith, St. Pius became a man determined to implement these changes and shepherd the Church back onto its righteous path.

To be more contemporary, this weekend we read a story about Pope Francis' visit to Greece and his service to the migrant refugees who escaped the ravages of neighboring Turkey during the great times of oppression. As reported this weekend, Pope Francis made a simple gesture of kindness to three families who were in need of care. On his return trip back to the Vatican, our Holy Family extended an invitation to three Muslim families to accompany him as his guests back to the Emerald City, where he promised to care for these families in the name of love. Because of this simple gesture, our Holy Father demonstrated to all of us in the local communities the manner in which we serve those in our neighborhoods as shepherds of those lambs in need of protection and care.

Pope Francis... St. Catherine of Sienna... Pope St. Pius V... you and me. As we reach the halfway point of this Easter Season, we have time now to reflect about the manner in which God has been a Good Shepherd to us and how we are called to do the same for those in our care. We have seen that example in our respective childhoods, as our

parents have served as shepherds to us. We have seen that example in the history of the Church, as reflected in so many lives of the saints that have gone before us and the saints that live among us. The first letter of Peter today calls God a shepherd, a guardian of our souls. Today, let us celebrate the joy of Easter by treating each other like a gentle lamb. Let us care for each other, let us open the gates for others in the name of God. Let us have this life and live it to the full in the care of our shepherd. This is our prayer.