

Feed My Lambs

This morning, we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, our annual reminder that Jesus is our Good Shepherd, the Son of God who willingly laid down his life for us and who calls each of us by name, leading us to green pastures and still waters if we will only follow. When the Temple authorities question him in our reading from John's Gospel, Jesus's reply seems to be less for them than for the generations of believers to come. "My sheep hear my voice," Jesus declares. "I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one." Although the Sanhedrin was sufficiently outraged by that last sentence to charge Jesus with blasphemy, his words are reassuring for those of us who fear getting lost in the bewildering jungle of postmodern life. So long as we listen for Jesus's voice and follow him, we have nothing to fear.

Perhaps no passage in Scripture better captures Jesus's promise than the 23rd Psalm. Tradition tells us that King David wrote this beautiful prayer, which is rightly a favorite at memorial services. David's confidence – "*surely*, your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever"— comforts those who mourn. When our hearts are breaking, it's good to be reminded that God's mercy will never abandon us, and that we will be reunited with our loved ones, spending eternity together in the many mansions of heaven. And as we go through our own struggles in this life, it can help to remember John's promise in the Book of Revelation that our Good Shepherd will someday "guide [us] to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes."

The beautiful world that our Creator has graciously provided for us offers plenty of green pastures. There are also a great many dark valleys, though, and it can sometimes be a challenge

to hear the voice of our Good Shepherd as we find our way through them. It's not necessarily a question of faith. It's entirely possible to believe wholeheartedly in Jesus and still wonder where in heaven's name he is when we're struggling to cope with a serious threat, illness, injury, or loss. Yes, Christ is risen, but he's also ascended, and he sometimes seems very far away.

St. Luke's telling of Peter's resurrection of Tabitha in the Book of Acts offers us comfort. Bible scholar William H. Willimon calls this "a little story." Its significance is easily underestimated, but it deserves a careful look. Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek) is a female disciple – in itself a departure from the accustomed order of things – who heads a welfare program for widows at Joppa. "Widows, by definition, are poor," Willimon writes, "on the bottom rung of society, without anyone to represent them or to protect them." When Tabitha dies, the widows lose their only source of lifegiving support. Willimon quotes Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza's observation that "in the first century—as today—the majority of the poor and starving were women, especially those women who had no male agencies that might have enabled them to share in the wealth of the patriarchal system." Without Tabitha's help, these women will die. The community sends for Peter, begging him to come without delay. Peter arrives and, in a scene reminiscent of Jesus's raising of Jairus' daughter and the centurion's son, clears the room, kneels in prayer, then takes Tabitha by the hand. Calling her by name, Peter brings Tabitha back from death. In this story, Willimon writes, "The name of Jesus Christ bears the same life-and-death giving power as the creator of the whole universe. All the boundaries of life, the highest heavens, the breath of life obey his command. Yet the story says that the same name belongs to widows and others who have no hope nor power except this name." We cannot explain what happened in Joppa, but we can take it as proof that Jesus bestowed upon Peter and the church his divine authority to overturn established systems that privilege the wealthy and deny essential help to the

poor. We can also surmise that, as members of his flock, we too are called by Jesus to join in the holy work of caring for those whom society too often despises and neglects.

In addition to being Good Shepherd Sunday, today is Mother's Day, a day to honor our mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and others who have been like mothers to us. For many, it's a lovely celebration. For those who are unable to become mothers, whose mothers or children have passed away, or whose relationships with their mothers or children are a source of pain, this can be a difficult day. Being a mother isn't easy. We often romanticize motherhood, praising mothers for their sacrifices while holding them to standards of perfection that few human beings could ever achieve. When kids or even adults go wrong, we blame their mothers, though we don't necessarily give mothers much credit when their children turn out well. We do, however, invest heavily in Mother's Day festivities. The National Retail Federation estimates that consumer spending will exceed \$34 billion this Mother's Day. That's a lot of flowers, greeting cards, jewelry, chocolate, and brunch. As someone who counts motherhood among my life's greatest blessings, I'm all for celebrating Mother's Day. Still, it may be time to reconsider how we do it.

Some things about motherhood are universal. Everyone was brought into this world by a mother, whether we love, like, or even know her. Being a mother means having at least one child, whether by birth, adoption, fostering, or marriage. One can be a mentor, teacher, caregiver, role model, or friend to a younger person, but being that person's mother is different. And while only the Holy Mother is thought to have been perfect, I sincerely believe that most mothers love their children and want what's best for them. So, if we're serious about honoring mothers, perhaps we should take a good, hard look at how we help them care for their children.

According to UNICEF, approximately one billion children worldwide experience poverty. Last October, the United Way reported that "[nine] million kids in the United States live below

the federal poverty line ... these children are growing up poor in America without access to basic necessities like food, shelter, [education,] and healthcare.” The Maryland Child Alliance reports that 15% of children in our state live in poverty, with Marylanders of color being twice as likely as white Marylanders to be impoverished. Our own food pantry was recently designated by the Anne Arundel County Food Bank as a “pantry of special needs” because we serve so many children. Kids can’t pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and mothers can’t give their children what they can’t afford to buy. If Americans have over \$34 billion to spend on Mother’s Day, though, surely we can help mothers provide the food, housing, healthcare, and education that their children need to thrive.

Bible scholar David F. Ford believes that, when Jesus says he and the Father are one, their union is unique but not exclusive. It comes with a hospitable welcome for his followers. Just as Jesus invites us to join his beloved flock, he also invites us, as he did Peter, to feed his lambs, sharing in his sacred work to bring life, wellbeing, and hope to those in need. So, on this Mother’s Day, joyfully celebrate the special mothers in your life with gifts, cards, outings, and especially your attention, love, and time. Most mothers tell pollsters that what they most want for Mother’s Day is time with the people they love. Then, as the Holy Spirit leads you and your resources permit, consider what gifts you can offer to mothers who need extra help giving their children a solid start in life. You might make a charitable donation, spend time volunteering at our food pantry, or reach out to your lawmakers, urging them to treat all children with compassion. Taking care of kids is good social policy, because everyone benefits when children grow up healthy, well educated, and happy. And remember, whatever we do for those whom society deems the least among us, we do for our Good Shepherd Jesus. Happy Mother’s Day, friends. Amen.