

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2021B

Calling a leader a “shepherd” was fairly standard in many ancient Near Eastern cultures. The Hebrew Testament, however, more often uses the term as a litmus test to point out the failure of Israel’s leaders. Today’s reading from Jeremiah is a classic example, where the prophet pronounces God’s judgment on the “shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture” (v.1). God was the true shepherd of Israel who had entrusted God’s “flock” to the kings and leaders of the nation who were to act as God’s representatives. As subordinate shepherds, the kings were supposed to gather in the nation and protect it while making sure that all the “sheep,” particularly the poor and the marginalized, were provided with proper care (v. 2).

But proper shepherding was precisely what the kings of Judah had failed to do. Jeremiah’s prophetic word singled out Jehoiakim as a prime example. His charge against false shepherds is devastating:

- ❖ they destroy the flock, they scatter the sheep, they drive the sheep away, they don’t care for the flock, and they strike fear and terror into the flock.

Rather than care for the flock, Jehoiakim had practiced “oppression and violence” by using his royal power to exploit the poor for his own material gain as outlined in Jeremiah 22:13-17. Instead of a shepherd, Jehoiakim and many of the other rulers of the people were really ravenous wolves in kings’ clothing. God’s judgment on the deceptive and destructive acts of the royal house would come down hard in the form of the Babylonian exile, which would “scatter” and “drive away” God’s people from their land (Jeremiah 23:2). The primary cause was the failure of God’s appointed shepherds to guard the flock from danger — especially when that danger was the shepherds themselves!

One would hope that this despicable lack of good shepherding was limited to ancient times but it just isn’t so. I stand here, before you today full of churning emotions; frustration, embarrassment, hurt, disappointment, and intense anger. I feel these emotions because, unfortunately, this lack of good shepherding even occurs in the church today. We are presently being bombarded by all the news media about the hundreds of graves being discovered at some of the residential schools. We are also being made aware of the physical and sexual abuse of so

many children in these schools. Then too, periodically, we are confronted with the news about the abusive behaviour of a priest or deacon. It is also disheartening when religious leaders pass rules and make pronouncements that sow division within the church. It has taken its toll on me and indeed I think it has taken its toll on every clergyman and lay person who is trying so hard to live righteously and to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed. Such exposés tend to chip away at the foundation of one's faith. I know, from personal experience, that many have lost their faith as a result of having been violated or as a result of hearing and/or reading about abuse.

For many years I worked with indigenous peoples – Iroquois, Ojibwa, Cree and Inuit. I sat and listened to so many tragic stories of people whose lives have been shattered by abuse. These stories and the tears and anguish that accompanied them are seared into my memory. While I was the pastor of Mission St. Andre, responsible for all the villages on the Hudson Coast, I was often confronted by angry Inuit and Cree who bluntly told me that they would not attend my church services because they would never again trust a clergyman. The flock has indeed been scattered because of clergy and religious who have violated their sacred vows to be good shepherds.

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While the discovery of the indigenous children's graves was the number one news item someone contacted me and asked, "With everything you have gone through and everything that goes on around you, how do you keep your faith?" This question forced me into a period of reflection. This was very much a situation where Jesus was saying, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourself and rest a while." (Mk 6:31) I eventually answered the question this way:

- ❖ I think back on the number of times, during my life, that I have felt the Holy Spirit guiding me and the times I have experienced God's healing power and protection. On at least one occasion it saved my life. This strengthens my faith.
- ❖ As I continue my study of scripture I am deeply moved by the beauty and cohesion of its 72 books written by many different authors over hundreds of

years. The guidance of God is very much evident throughout. Scripture helps me deepen my relationship with God and thus grow in faith.

- ❖ I look at nature and marvel at the extraordinary beauty, variety, and astounding intricacy of creation. Let me give you an example. In 1995 fourteen wolves were released in Yellowstone National Park. No one expected the miracle that the wolves would bring. It started with the wolves hunting deer. This led to a rapidly decreasing deer population. The wolves presence also made the deer avoid parts in the park where they were easy prey. Thanks to the deer's absence, those parts started to regenerate. Forests of aspen and willow trees started to flourish. With the trees and bushes came more berries and bugs. As soon as that happened, various bird species started moving in. With the increasing tree population, another species was attracted; the beaver previously extinct in the region, moved back and the dams they built provided habitats for otters, muskrats and reptiles. The wolves also killed coyotes. As a result of that, the number of rabbits and mice grew which meant more hawks, red foxes, badgers and weasels in the park. Even the population of bald eagles and ravens rose. But here is where it gets really interesting. The wolves changed the behaviour of the rivers. With more balance between predator and prey came the possibility for other species to thrive. There was less erosion because of increased vegetation and the river banks were stabilized. The channels narrowed, more pools formed, and the rivers stayed more fixed in their course. So, the wolves did not only transform the great ecosystem of Yellowstone they also changed the park's physical geography. When one reflects on this marvel of nature one can't help but see how God cares for His creation and keeps it in balance. Jesus said, "Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more are you than birds! If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown in the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?" This is another source of my faith.
- ❖ But most of all my faith comes from the fact that God has provided us with a new shepherd-king, the Messiah, who rules over a reunited flock and brings salvation and safety to his people. This king, Christ the king, rules with justice and righteousness. Jesus adopted the shepherd imagery and

defined his own mission as the Messiah, seeking the lost sheep. Jesus' disciples have used the same terms to describe their leadership in the Christian movement after Jesus' ascension. Jesus is still the chief shepherd but his representatives are known as **poinemas** – meaning pastors or shepherds. There are so many good shepherds, both clergy and lay, who gather us together to glorify God and deepen our spiritual lives. Think of the people who have had a positive influence on you. I think of my parents, my wife Marilyn, some of my teachers like Miss Walsh, Miss Kelly, Martin O'Hara, and Dr. Tom Francoeur, priest friends like Bishop Leonard Crowley, Fr. Fitz, Joe Cameron, Emmitt Johns, Eric O'Connor, and John Walsh, religious sisters like Joan Conway, Gloria, Carmalita, and Sheila Hammond, and so many laity who have truly lived out the Gospel. My faith is also strengthened by all of you who faithfully come to church week after week because of that faith. For this I am eternally grateful.

- ❖ Anchoring all of this is the Eucharist. Jesus has promised us that every time we come together to celebrate the Eucharist, he will be Emanuel – God with us. We gather together recognizing that we are fragile and broken and asking for forgiveness of our sins. Jesus nourishes us in the Eucharist and gives us the necessary strength to overcome evil just as he did following his Baptism. Thus, strengthened we can face the ugliness of the evil in society and proclaim the Good News and live as disciples of Jesus. We as church have overcome the attacks of the devil for centuries and we will continue to do so. This is my faith.

Deacon Gerry

