

Message by Pastor Jim Goos

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Do you have someone who notices when something is not quite right? Let me give you an example.

Joe was usually a happy guy. He whistled a lot. People could always hear him coming, whistling some bright and cheery melody. But then things changed. One day a friend stopped him and asked him, "Joe, are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm alright" was the reply.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure! Why do you think something's wrong?"

"Because you don't whistle anymore." There was a moment when their eyes met and searched each other. Then the words began to come out slowly. Things weren't going well. Joe's job was in jeopardy. And at home, relationships were strained.

The conversation continued over several cups of coffee. The friend was no professional counselor--just a friend. He listened, and made an occasional comment when it seemed appropriate. All that happened was that one person was willing to share the load of another.

When they left the cafe they arranged to meet again, not necessarily to continue their conversation, just to be together.

There is no conclusion to the story; only a beginning, and the promise, "to be continued." It's like many of the stories of our

own lives. If you have a friend like that say a prayer of thanks, and stay close.

Most of us do know such a person. They seem to have a built in sense of knowing when something is wrong in our life. It is a gift, but it is a gift we all can cultivate and nurture. That is what we have been trying to do in the Church for a long time. Today's Gospel reading is one of the models that we follow.

Here Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd. He tells us something of the special relationship that shepherds of the Middle East have with their sheep: "I know my sheep and my sheep know me."

If 2 or 3 flocks of sheep somehow got mixed together, the shepherds could separate them simply by calling to their own flocks and leading them apart in different directions. The sheep know the shepherd's voice; and the shepherd knows the sheep by sight, and by name. The shepherd calls them, and they respond.

There are times in our lives when we need a shepherd. When illness or any kind of tragedy breaks into our life, we need a shepherd to lead us close to the calm waters of healing and refreshment. When we or a loved one walk in the valley of the shadow of death and grief, we need comfort that only our Shepherd can give. When we have lost our way and have strayed into behaviour that threatens to destroy us and bring grief to those we love, we need to be sought and found and brought back again into the safety of the flock.

Sometimes we wander far from our Shepherd. One or two bad choices can lead us to a place where we feel lost and alone, where nobody cares what happens to us. There we need to be found by someone who knows us, and who says, "Can I help?" When love calls us by name it is indeed the Good Shepherd who

calls us--the very one who was willing to lay down his life that we may have life.

We live in a world that is often very impersonal towards us. It has signs that say "Take a number and wait to be served." It assigns us Social Insurance Numbers, health care numbers, credit card numbers, Driver's License Numbers.

We feel like we are just a number, a statistic. That can cause us to feel that we have no identity, nothing individual or special or important. To be a number suggests that there is no relationship.

Our world teaches us to look after number one, and to stand up for our rights. When everyone is concerned only for themselves, no one cares about others; no one stands up for others; no one is out to show love for others.

God's Kingdom is the exact opposite. God created us to be in relationship with others, to be loved and to love; to be known and to know. Who we are is important, and today's Gospel highlights that importance. "I know my sheep, and my sheep know me."

Jesus is really talking about people, not sheep. In fact He is talking about us. Jesus is telling us, "I know you by name, for you are mine." Jesus knows us, loves us, and cares for us. Using a modern term, in terms of how Jesus loves us, "He is all in." He loves us so much that He willingly died on the cross for us and for our sin.

The Good Shepherd is not only a beautiful image that shows Jesus' relationship to us, but of how we ought to be to one another. Jesus has called us to love one another as He loves us. Sadly, we in the church have never been very good at loving one another. We have been much better at judging others; or at leaving in a huff when someone hurts us or offends us.

But we are called to witness the essence of the Good Shepherd to all others, those in our congregation, and those beyond it; those we know well, and those we don't know well; those we like a lot, and those we don't like at all. They are all part of Jesus' flock. It was for them too that Jesus lay down his life. Everyone should hear Jesus' voice through us and should see Jesus' love through us.

May we take the time to notice when something isn't quite right with our neighbour. May we show love to everyone as Jesus has shown His love for us. Amen.