

The Rev. Daren J. Zehnle  
Franciscan Retreat Center, Quincy University  
19 July 2009

The Sixteenth Sunday of the Year (B)  
Great River Teens Encounter Christ #260

"When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34).

My dear young friends, what does it mean to be like shepherdless sheep?

Such a flock has no one to give it direction, no one to guide it, no one to follow. It is free to wander on its own, chasing after its own path that will undoubtedly lead to thickets and ravines. It will likely get lost and be unable to return to the pasture, to that place of safety and refreshment, to that place it longs to be.

Such a flock, having no one to defend it, will certainly fall prey to the wild beasts, to the ravenous wolves who seek to steal the sheep away and devour it (cf. John 10:12).

The Scriptures do not refer to the People of God as "the sheep of his pasture" (Psalm 100:3) because we, like sheep, are smelly and unintelligent, but because "all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

In our stubbornness and pride, we think that we know the way that leads to the "verdant pastures" and "restful waters" (Psalm 23:1-3). But we do not.

The more we follow our own way, the farther we stray, we find ourselves in thicker thickets and ever-deeper ravines. We find ourselves entangled in the brambles, unable to set ourselves free, and we do not know how to return safely home.

We find ourselves in the company of sadness, fear and doubt, though when we set off on our path we thought we were heading towards happiness, joy and peace.

What is more, the more lost we become, the more entangled we become, the more easily we fall victim to those wretched wolves who want nothing more than to feast upon us.

But these wolves are not always easy to detect, for they lurk in the shadows and strike swiftly. Sometimes they even prowl about in sheep's skin, looking for the weak point in even the strongest of sheep. They are very skilled at their hunting and the sheep without a shepherd, without a guide and protector, are easy prey indeed.

Jesus looked upon the vast crowd before him and saw their dire state and was moved with deep compassion for them. He saw within their hearts a deep longing, a yearning, for something more, something that would satisfy them fully. When the people heard where Jesus was going by boat, "they hastened there on

foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before" Jesus, because they saw something in him and heard something in his words that satisfied the longings of their hearts (Mark 6:33). Will we hasten to him?

Looking upon his people, the Lord said, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock" (Jeremiah 23:3) when he said, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:14).

The Good Shepherd comes among us bearing his rod and his staff (Psalm 23:4). The rod is the scepter of the king by which he establishes his will for our lives and marks out for us the path that leads to the fulfillment of the greatest desires of our hearts. The staff is his cross, with which he drives away the wolves and crushes their power. He holds his cross aloft, calling us by name to follow after him. In this way he is both our guide and our protector; he is our shepherd, we are his sheep.

But sheep do not follow a shepherd simply because he is the shepherd. A flock follows the shepherd because it trusts the shepherd, that he has the good of the sheep in mind and in heart, that he will only do what is good for the sheep. Because the sheep trust the shepherd they follow his voice and his staff.

It is the same with us. The Good Shepherd himself says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"

(John 10:27). We are able to say, "The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want," only if we trust in the Lord and follow him because he knows us through and through and knows what is best for us and what will lead us to the greatest of joys (Psalm 23:1).

He calls us not simply to follow him, but to pick up our crosses in union with his. The Cross is not to be feared, but to be embraced! Our Shepherd knows how to lead us to still waters, to that place of lasting joy and peace, where our deepest desires are met.

My dear young friends, will you look to Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you, his sheep? Will you follow him? Will you let his gaze meet yours, that he might look upon you with compassion? His heart longs for you, and truly your heart longs for him! Do not be afraid to follow him!

Look to his Cross, the sign of his victorious love, and see in it what you are to be. This Shepherd feeds his sheep with his own Body and Blood as he calls his sheep to become like Himself.

Now, my dear parents, I turn to you. The primary task that the Lord has entrusted to you is to help your sons and daughters recognize the voice of their Shepherd. With him, you are to help drive away the wolves and guide your children along his path.

Doing so requires that you first of all hear the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow him. You cannot lead your children to Christ unless you follow him, unless you trust him to lead you to verdant pastures. If you look first to Christ you will truly love your children and will be able to lead them to the fountain of joy and peace.

To you, young men, I offer a final word. The Lord has promised through his prophet Isaiah to give to his Church shepherds after his own heart (cf. Isaiah Jeremiah 3:15). Ask the Lord if he wants to give you as a shepherd for his flock. "Do not be afraid to say 'yes' to Jesus, to find your joy in doing his will, giving yourself completely to the pursuit of holiness, and using all your talents in the service of others." Parents, if the Lord chooses one of your sons, do not hinder him but entrust him lovingly to the Lord, for only in following the will of the Lord will your sons find fulfillment, joy and peace.

Let each us this day, as we strive to hear more clearly the voice of the Shepherd, beg the Master of the Harvest to send forth more laborers into his harvest. May he grant us many more shepherds to defend us from the wolves and to guide us along his way. Amen!