

Timothy J. Grassi

4th Sunday of Easter (A) 2020

This is one of my favorite stories and I have probably told it before, but I think it's worth hearing again. A soldier dying on a Korean battlefield asked for a priest. The Medic could not find one. A wounded man lying nearby heard the request and said, "I am a priest." The Medic turned to the speaker and saw his condition, which was as bad as that of the other. "It will kill you if you move," he warned. But the wounded chaplain replied. "The life of a man's soul is worth more than a few hours of my life." He then crawled to the dying soldier, heard his confession, gave him absolution and the two died hand in hand. I LOVE that story, because it speaks to me as a priest and it makes me realize what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel on the Good Shepherd Sunday. Jesus frequently used the image of a shepherd to describe Himself and the reason is because it was a very familiar image to the people of His time. It was something they could easily relate to and understand. It's a bit foreign to me since I'm clueless about any firsthand experience of sheep and shepherding, but with all my studies, I have come to a much deeper and richer understanding of this image. Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd Who knows His sheep and Who's sheep know Him. There are 3 qualities of a good shepherd that explain this relationship. First of all a good shepherd is totally committed. Shepherding is not just a job to earn a living, but

rather, it's a commitment to a flock, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. Every moment of his life is dedicated to that flock. The second quality of a shepherd is he must be a deeply caring person. His satisfaction is tied up with the welfare of the flock. This is why Jesus often refers to the Good Shepherd as finding the lost sheep and picking it up and putting it on His shoulders because He cares so much for that sheep. The last quality of a good shepherd is to be courageous. The best way to describe this is to explain what Jesus means in the gospel when He says, "Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep." What do you think it means for Him to be the gate? That was a very unrelatable image for me. In his book *The Holy Land*, John Kellman describes this by explaining a field pen. It consists of a circular stone wall about four feet high with an opening in it. Kellman says that one day a Holy land tourist saw a field pen near Hebron. He asked a shepherd sitting nearby, "Where's the gate for your pen?" The shepherd said, "I am the gate." The shepherd then told the tourist how he herded his flock into the pen each night and then lay down across the entrance. No sheep could leave the pen and no wild animal could enter it, without stepping over his body and awakening him. That explains what it means for a shepherd to be courageous. So, there you have it, the 3 qualities of a good shepherd, committed, caring and courageous, and Jesus the Good Shepherd had these qualities to a perfect degree. And every priest, and

bishop is expected to model their lives as shepherds after the Good Shepherd, Jesus, Himself. Now, I'm speaking from my heart and I have to say that as I thought about this Gospel passage this week I couldn't help but think that in today's environment, we are not committed, caring and courageous shepherds, but rather, we are detached, betraying and cowardly. That story I told you about the military chaplain who went to his death on the battlefield because he crawled to hear the confession of another soldier is what attracted me to the priesthood. Not to lock myself in the rectory and lock the doors of the church and turn souls away. A selfish bachelor can do that, but not a good shepherd. I don't wish death upon any priest that should die as a result of this corona virus and I don't want to suggest that precautions shouldn't be made and exercised at all costs, but in NYC more than 50 transit workers have died as a result of the corona virus because they are considered essential workers and they had to risk their lives to provide transportation for the many medical workers. What about the essential workers for the salvation of souls? We priests knew what we signed up for when we went to seminary and nobody twisted my arm to make the sacrifices for the sake of the salvation of souls. I totally get it if people are afraid to come to Mass and they are self quarantined, but I find it very hard to reconcile being a committed, caring and courageous shepherd when I am expected to lock myself in and lock souls out. The last line of the Gospel says,

“I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” My biggest fear is that at the end of this pandemic we may be physically alive, but will we have dead souls? The abundant life that Jesus is talking about is a soul that’s alive with JC regardless of the conditions of the body. I hope and pray that we earthly shepherds will be the gate like Jesus, the Good Shepherd and repeat the words of the dying chaplain who said, “The life of a man’s soul is worth more than a few hours of my life.”