

Homily for Easter IV, 2018

April 22, 2018

Let me start with a very brief story told by a writer recently about himself. (I've shortened it a bit):

Back in the summer of 2002, I was reeling from rage over 9/11, and over the Catholic sex abuse scandal. I was so overcome by it that I had to see a dentist to get a mouthguard made for wearing at night, because I was grinding my teeth so fiercely that my wife couldn't sleep. She was so worried about what was happening to me on the inside. I couldn't rest. The injustices of these two catastrophic events was eating me alive. She compelled me to swallow my pride and go see a therapist.

He told me something in that first session that was offensive and painful to hear, and that I furiously rejected. But years later, I came to see that he was right.

What he told me was this: "You need to accept that under the right circumstances, you could have been flying one of those planes. You could have been Mohammed Atta."

A few weeks ago, on Good Friday, as we heard the Gospel story of Jesus' trial before Pilate, we were reminded that every one of us – me, and you – could have been in the mob shouting "Crucify him!" That's the human condition: good, but scarred to the depths by original sin. Every one of us can be caught up in feeling aggrieved, feeling taken advantage of, and then lashing out; especially if we can do it in company with other people – whether in person, or on the news we watch, or on social media. (When I was studying psychology we used to joke that the proper way to count people in a group was "one, two, three, mob...")

In the Letter of John we just heard from, Saint John said, "We are God's children now; what we shall later become has not yet been revealed..." We have to allow God to work a deep, deep change in us, to transform us into someone we wouldn't even recognize at this moment. Otherwise we will not enter the kingdom of God. How easy is it to find the way? Jesus says the gate is narrow, and the road is hard...

Yet, as we hear in the Gospel, the Good Shepherd does not leave us alone and lost. He searches us out in a lost-ness that we probably do not even recognize. In a sobering Gospel read a few weeks ago to those preparing for Baptism Jesus says to the Pharisees, "If you were blind, there would be no sin in that. But 'We see,' you say; so your sin remains." Thinking we are aware of what truly ails us when we are not, is what we face.

This Sunday, called Good Shepherd Sunday because each year we read a Gospel about Jesus as the Good Shepherd, is traditionally a day to talk and pray about vocations to the priesthood. That's where I'm going with this.

Every sort of vocation in the church has, the church tells us, a particular charism – the Greek word for a gift from God that is to be given away as the central part of the work of those called to that vocation. The particular charism of diocesan priests is this: **the sanctification of the laity**. The core of my calling as a priest is to help you to become holy – for me to imitate the Good Shepherd in helping you to become, with God's assistance, "what you shall be" when the

truth of God is fully revealed in you. That does not mean that I want you to become more pious, or to pray more.

The core of the transformation God has to work in each one of us is the redemption of what flew the planes into the World Trade Center and what shouted for the crucifixion of His Son: the instinct that rules us through our desires and our fears, an instinct we experience as our righteous readiness to do harm to others in word and deed.

The central work of a diocesan priest is to remind us that we are, at this moment, tragically imperfect; and that we don't yet see accurately our imperfection, which is much, much deeper than everyday failures of morality. Our daily sins spring from hidden roots, mostly in our lying to ourselves that we do not need to be profoundly, deeply changed. "What we shall be has not yet been revealed..."

Most people on this planet don't think about this much; they and you quite properly spend most of every day doing the work of your own particular state in life, living by your own distinctive charism from God: raising children, caring for grandchildren, going to work, fixing the house, shopping for food, looking in on a neighbor, and all the rest. That's fine and that's right. But the part of us that manages that everyday living, fine and right in itself, is not all there is in anyone; as the regular outbreaks of violence – from harsh words to spouse abuse to drugging oneself in various ways, up through school shootings and wars – should remind us. That evil, as the writer learned from his therapist, is not just in those "other people." Every human being, believer or not, needs to be changed by God so that we can become more and more free from the herd-instincts, the fears, and the false righteousness that make God's good earth into a version of hell in ways little and big.

The work of priests, through preaching and the Sacraments, is to help people toward that freedom from selfish and destructive instinct and self-deception. That's why not only our church but our world needs the work of priests.

Imagine a future without churches, where everyone has forgotten or never heard of God's call to become different from what we instinctively are. Can you imagine a world without a compass, where power without limits is everything, and the strong exploit the weak even more than they do now? The church, the Body of the Risen Christ, keeps us from that war of all against all by the modest, regular, unassuming work of reminding at least some people – you, and the other people around the world gathered around altars for the Sacraments each Sunday – of our eternal call and destiny. We are not destined to stay in our selfishness and self-deception. "Who we shall be has not yet been revealed. We know that when it is revealed, we shall be like Him."

So three things to walk out of here remembering: First, fallen humanity is not "somebody else": it is me, and you, in each of us our deeply rooted readiness to call evil things good when it's convenient to us – especially if we can find a group that agrees with us. We need redemption from our fallen selves.

Second, we are not without hope: The Good Shepherd offers reminders of who we might become, and help for the change that we need to undergo. We find those reminders and that help in Christ's Risen Body, His Church, especially here in the Mass and Sacraments. For

nonbelievers, the very existence of the Church is a reminder, a nudge, that there is more than power, more than success, more than our few decades of life on this planet. Who we are now is a prison; but there is a door out.

And finally, not just the Church but the world needs the work of priests for their sanctification, so that the eternal call and hope are not forgotten in the busyness of the everyday. The future of the priesthood in this country is perilous, as you know. That puts at risk the future of the Sacraments here, but also puts at risk the larger work of healing the culture from its illness, if congregations like this one can no longer be nourished and encouraged to do the work of transforming ourselves and then transforming our part of God's world.

We trust that God calls a few in each generation to this particular vocation; we need to pray that they hear this call; we need to remove, so far as we can, obstacles to hearing and following that call; and we need to encourage young people to listen and, if they hear, to respond generously to God's call. Without the Risen Christ, the Good Shepherd, embodied in holy Church congregations and in holy lay people living in the everyday but knowing their eternal destiny, the lost sheep will continue to turn on one another because they know no better way.