Good Shepherd Sunday 4 B 2024

 In naming Himself as our Good Shepherd, Jesus reminds us that He knows us: *“I know My sheep, and mine know Me.”* The Lord knows me. The Lord knows you. The Lord knows everyone of us better than anyone else knows us, or possibly could know us. The Lord knows me infinitely better than I know myself.

Let’s consider what all this means. It means the Lord knows every one of my faults. He knows all of my secrets. He knows things about me that no one else knows. He knows things about me that I don’t know. He knows my every thought and desire. He knows everything I don’t want anyone else to know about me. All of this is as disturbing as it is true.

And in spite of all the Lord knows about me—and how well He knows me, and each of you—still, He’s willing to lay down His life for me, for you, for every one of us.

The Lord knows every one of my thoughts, words and deeds—past, present and future. There’s nothing about me the Lord doesn’t know. More importantly, the Lord knows my story, the narrative that links together everything about me. My life is much more than the sum of all my words and deeds. My life is the story of my relationship with God, with family and fraternity, and with others, near and far, who are part of my story.

In addition to knowing everything I’ve ever done, the Lord also knows why I did it, and its impact, for good or ill, on me and my relationship with God and with others. Besides every thought that has ever crossed my mind, the Lord knows where each thought came from, how it got there, what I did with it, and how it touched my relationship with Him and with others in my life.

As well as knowing my every desire, every want, every craving, the Lord also knows well what are my deepest and truest needs, and all the ways—good and bad—that I try to satisfy them. The Lord, my Good Shepherd, knows me and knows my story, knows the whole of my story. And He knows you, and your story just as well.

And He knows the stories behind our stories: the simplicities and the complexities, the joys and the sorrows, the selfishness and the generosity, the strengths and weaknesses, the hopes and disappointments, the talents and disabilities, and the circumstances and opportunities that are part of every one of our stories—yours and mine—and the story of all of us together as His people, as Franciscans, as the Church.

And He knows and understands how all of these contribute to the twists and turns, the ups and downs, the graces and the challenges that weave together our thoughts, words, deeds, choices and decisions—into the story that each of our lives is about.

But to say that the Lord knows and understands our stories does not free us from accountability for our lives and our deeds. In the greatest story of all—the story of God’s love for all of us, you and I are living human characters in God’s story, created by God and called by God to write the stories of our lives—as a response to His love for us.

We’re responsible not only for our thoughts, words and deeds. We’re responsible for the narrative that knits them all together, and responsible for the relationship with God and with others we spend our lives strengthening, or weakening. Our psychologized culture might tempt us to think, maybe even wish, that understanding why I did or failed to do something, excuses me from personal responsibility. Contemplation directs me to look at what I did or failed to do. Contemplation helps me to take responsibility for it and to help me, with God’s grace, to make changes in the narrative, to change the story line, that I might more faithfully and generously respond to God’s love, and to the love of those around me.

God loves my story and God loves your story, not because our stories are perfect (they are not), but because they are our stories. And God loves us. It is in and through the stories of our lives that God meets us, and makes His home in our hearts, and saves us.

The Good Shepherd knows our stories, and with the Spirit’s help, He is ever by our side, as we write a new chapter in those stories every day. That the Lord knows us as well as He does, is no reason to be afraid of Him, but rather a reason to rejoice, since He Himself is no stranger to the human story. He Himself lived our narrative of human pain and suffering, even through death, laying down His life to take it up again—the Risen Lord of life.

To follow Jesus is to imitate Him, to return His love, by loving as He loved, with a love not motivated by self-interest, but by gratitude for God’s loving us. Jesus is “Love enfleshed,” love that gives life itself, for us. The guiding principle for every Franciscan is *“fraternitas,”* a network of human relationships in which God’s love is for every person, the uniqueness of whom the individual is valued, and mercy is experienced, glorifying God. We gather in *“fraternity,”* to refresh in our minds and hearts the form of the Gospel by which we’re called to shape and live our own stories.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd is our model shepherd. The one who calls us is the one we follow. *“Lord, You lead, I’ll imitate, because I place my trust in You.”* Shepherd me, lead me, guide me.

On this World Day of Prayer for Vocations, in the diversity and uniqueness of each and every vocation, we *listen, discern, and go forth*, to care for one another intelligently and passionately, freely and mindfully, in the ways of the Kingdom, in *“fraternitas.”*

