



## GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

Traditionally, the fourth Sunday of Easter has been called Good Shepherd Sunday because the gospel on this Sunday is always from John 10, in which Jesus uses the image of Good Shepherd to speak of himself. I begin my reflections with this lovely story told by Dick Folger.

*Students at the parish school were learning about Jesus and his role as the Good Shepherd. They were given a month to memorize Psalm 23, which they would have to recite at a school assembly with the pastor and all the parents attending. When the big night came, the first student nervously stepped up to the microphone and began, "The Lord is my shepherd," Then his mind went as blank as a wall. The parents waited while he struggled to remember the next line. Finally, in desperation, he said, "And that's all I need to know."*

*At first there was silence, and then applause began. The claps came slowly at first, finally building to full, thunderous ovation. The child was right; that is all we need to know.*

The following two reflections are taken from Fr. Flor McCarthy's book of reflections on the Sunday readings. If you like your job and/or enjoy your volunteer work, you will love these reflections:

### Finding Joy in One's Work

*A huge amount of our lives is taken up with work. Hence, the way we regard our work is of the greatest importance. If our work has meaning, it becomes a blessing. But if it has no meaning, or little meaning, it becomes almost a curse.*

*It has been said that the first of our problems is to find the work we are meant to do in this world. Vincent van Gogh spent many years trying to find out what he wanted to do with his life. Finally, after much searching, he discovered that he wanted to be a painter. From that day on his life changed. It wasn't that it suddenly became easy. The opposite would be nearer the truth. It was just that, whereas up to this his life was going nowhere, now it was going somewhere definite. He said:*

***I often feel that I am as rich as Croesus, not in money, however. I am rich because I have found in my work something to which I can devote myself heart and soul, and which gives meaning and inspiration to my life. I think it is a very great blessing when people find their work.***

***If at times I feel rising within me the desire for a life of ease, I go back fondly to a life of hardship. This is not the road on which one perishes. Rather, this is a powerful stream that will bear me safely to port.***

*What's the difference between the good shepherd and the hireling? It is the contrasting attitudes they bring to the work of shepherding. The hireling does it because he has to. For him it's just a job; his heart is not in it. The good shepherd does it because he wants to. His heart is in it.*

*People like the good shepherd are very fortunate people. They have found a real treasure. They haven't just found work; they have found avocation in life. They have an occupation into which they can put their hearts, and which affords an outlet for the talents that are in them.*

*Even though their work may be difficult and unspectacular, it glows with meaning because it is a labor of love. Even though their lives may contain many difficulties and hardships, deep down they are contented. We must never equate a happy life with an easy life. The harder the task to which we give ourselves for love's sake, the more it will exalt us.*

*Happy are those who have found their work, no matter how humble that work is. They are saved from half-heartedness, and from the tragedy of only half-living their lives. That work brings out the best in them. It's no exaggeration to say that for them it becomes the road to salvation.*

*Jesus found his work. It consisted in being a good shepherd to the Father's flock. Two characteristics mark the relationship between the good shepherd and his sheep. First, he cares about his sheep to the point where he is willing to die to defend them. And Jesus did give his life for his sheep. He died voluntarily. Second, he knows his sheep and they know him. Good leaders know their own, and their own know them. There is a closeness between the leader and the led. Without this, leadership easily becomes oppressive.*

*Needless to say, we are not sheep. As St. John reminds us: we are God's children, and God wants us to have life and a hereafter.*

### A Sense of Vocation

*Today's Gospel is about caring or not caring. The hireling doesn't know or care about the sheep. The good shepherd knows his sheep, and cares about them to the point that he is willing to die to defend them. Caring is costly and risky. Carers are very special people.*

Today there is a lot of concern about care-giver burnout, and rightly so. However, burn-out is not always the result of too much work. It is more likely to result from a sense of futility. People can work long hours as long as they feel that their work is making a difference. But if they feel that their efforts are being wasted, that no matter how long and hard they work, it won't make any difference, then they will experience a feeling of weariness and exhaustion.

The thing to consider is not so much whether the work is difficult in itself, but whether it has a purpose. What really saps one's energy is giving oneself purposelessly. Purposeful giving is not as apt to deplete one's energy.

To have a work which absorbs one gives a person tremendous strength and energy. Alexander Solzhenitsyn spent several years in a Siberian labor camp. The thing which most helped him to survive was his writing. In his monumental work, *The Gulag Archipelago*, he says:

**Sometimes in a sullen work party with machine-gunners barking around me, lines and images crowded in so urgently that I felt myself borne through the air, overleaping the column in my hurry to reach the work compound and find a corner to write. At such moments I was both free and happy.**

**I went on writing. In winter in the warming-up shack, in spring and summer on the scaffolding at the building site; in the interval between two barrow loads of mortar I would put my bit of paper on the bricks and write down with a pencil stub the verses which had rushed into my head while I was slapping on the last hodful. I was searched, and counted, and herded over the steppe. I sat in the mess hall over the ritual gruel sometimes not even noticing its taste, deaf to those around me—feeling my way about my verses and trimming them to fit like bricks in a wall.**

To have a work which absorbs one is a great blessing. But to have a sense of vocation is an even greater blessing. In fact, it is one of the greatest blessings in life. Jesus had it to a degree we will never equal. On one occasion he said to his apostles, 'I have a food of which you know nothing. My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete his work' (Jn 4:33-34). And we see it even more clearly in today's Gospel where he talks about himself as the good shepherd.

Unlike the hireling, the good shepherd loves his work. To him shepherding is a vocation. It doesn't mean that his life is easier than that of the hireling. In fact, his life is more difficult because he works harder and cares more about the sheep than the hireling does. But his life is more satisfying. His work nourishes him.

Love is a marvelous source of strength and energy. Love makes a person brave. Where genuine love is present no sacrifice is too great. Love conquers all difficulties. If we love, and the energy will be given to us.

Today is often referred to as 'vocations' Sunday. For Christians, all vocations are vocations to love.

I feel very fortunate that I love what I do and see it as responding to a call by God. With Fr. McCarthy, I totally agree that burnout is not so much the result of too much work. Rather it is the result doing work which one does not have one's heart in. The three things I enjoy the most about my ministry are:

- Celebrating the liturgy with you — especially on the weekends.
- The time I spend writing.
- Meeting people one on one. I enjoy very much getting to know parishioners and doing what I can to help them in their personal issues and in becoming more connected with the parish.

Someone shared the following piece with me concerning the hands of a priest.

### ***The Beautiful Hands Of A Priest***

*We need them in life's early morning.  
We need them again at it's close.  
We feel their warm clasp of true friendship.  
We seek them when tasting life's woes.  
At the altar each day we behold them  
And the hands of the king on his throne  
Are not equal to them in their greatness,  
Their dignity stands all alone.  
And when we are tempted and wander  
To pathways of shame and of sin,  
It's the hands of the priest that will absolve us  
Not once but again and again.  
And when we are taking life's partner,  
Other hands may prepare us a feast.  
But, the hand that will bless and unite us  
Is the beautiful hand of a priest.  
God bless them and keep them all holy  
For the host which their fingers caress.  
When can a poor sinner do better,  
Than to ask him to guide thee and bless.  
When the hour of death comes upon us,  
May our courage and strength be increased  
By seeing raised over us in blessing  
The beautiful hands of a priest.*

I do appreciate very much all of you who pray for me and for all priests. Only God knows how the faithful and persistent prayers of God's People impact the lives of priests and deacons. Thank You.

In Christ,

