

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Some people are offended by this image the Lord uses with regard to seeing people as sheep without a shepherd. After all, sheep are apparently pretty dumb creatures. Left to their own devices, they tend to wander away. They have no fangs or claws or ferocious bite, and with their spindly legs and top-heavy bodies, they don't move that fast. Therefore, they are basically defenseless animals. They're also easily frightened and confused and have been known to follow one-after-the-other off a cliff when startled by a predator or even a loud noise. Finally, if not watched over carefully, sheep tend to eat too much and make themselves sick. Come to think about it, who would be pleased to be likened to a sheep?

Unfortunately, there are moments when it appears that God's people are often more sheep-like than we would like to admit. A priest-classmate told me that on a recent Sunday rather than beginning Mass with the normal greeting, "The Lord be with you", he said, "There's something wrong with this microphone". Still, the people responded, "And with your spirit". That sounds kind of sheep-like to me. Another classmate once quipped, "Have you ever noticed how when you're preaching, people just stare at you with a glassy look in their eyes. It's as if you're talking in Chinese to them." Or maybe it's more like sheep, looking off to the distant horizon, wondering where their next meal is coming from?

So, let's give the Lord the benefit of the doubt. Maybe we are like sheep in some ways. Many of us have wandered away from who we really are or want to be, and find ourselves lost and all alone. Haven't there been times when you felt totally defenseless in the face of an illness or a misunderstanding or outright hostility from someone? Who hasn't panicked and said or done something stupid when faced with a fearful situation? And, God knows, I'm sure I'm not the only one who has eaten too much and made myself sick on more than one occasion.

Now that we've established that maybe we're more sheep-like than we want to admit, let's take a look at this passage from St. Mark's Gospel. Written in his typical stark style, he leaves it to us to dig for the wealth of meaning he hides in each phrase.

The Twelve whom Jesus had sent out two-by-two have all returned, just as our Teens just returned from their missionary journey. The Apostles are so excited and wanted to tell Jesus "all they had done and taught", just as our Teens will shortly tell us about their exploits on their journey.

The crowds, however, were all pressing in on them. They could hardly hear themselves talk. So, Jesus said, "C'mon, let's get out of here," and they climbed into a boat to head to a deserted place where they could have time alone. But it was not to be. People followed them. They spread the word. By the time they arrived at their destination, there were more people there than had been in the first place.

In the final sentence of this passage, St. Mark reveals the depth with which Christ loves people, for he says that when Jesus saw the vast crowd, “his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.” It’s important to know that the word translated as “pity” speaks of the gut-wrenching suffering of parents who see their child in real pain.

Because I have witnessed and shared in the misery of parents in such heart-rending circumstances, I picture Jesus getting out of the boat, looking around at this enormous crowd, and falling to his knees sobbing great tears and perhaps wailing aloud. Maybe the Apostles thought he was overwhelmed because the people wouldn’t leave them alone, or he broke down because he was just so tired he couldn’t go on anymore. But, no, it was the people’s hunger, their heartfelt search for meaning, their longing for more of his teaching and wisdom, for Mark tells us, rather, he saw them “like sheep without a shepherd” so “he began to teach them many things.”

In this, Jesus was teaching the real lesson that he wanted his disciples to learn. Beyond anything words could explain, they saw how he identified with the needs that appeared before him. He was showing them, and us, that if we are to carry forth his mission, we had to feel the real needs of the people. Only then would they know that they had to offer.

Pope Francis explains this in his encyclical letter, “Joy of the Gospel”, when he says that an evangelizing community must get involved in people’s daily lives. It is to bridge differences, even willing to sacrifice itself if necessary. Our Holy Father tells us not to be too concerned about efficiency or cost or our free time. He reminds us that something lovers understand instinctively applies to our mission as well. He says, “Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time and cost.”

Jesus’ intention was to go off to rest with his disciples. However, it was that lost retreat that turned into one of the most important and memorable times they spent with him. Jesus’ response to this crowd would lead to the great feeding of the multitude that we’ll be contemplating in the next few weeks, and it all began because Jesus’ guts were torn to pieces when he saw the people as sheep in need of a shepherd.

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, if we allow ourselves to enter into the mind and heart of Jesus, we cannot just sit back and criticize our leaders. This Scripture invites us to look at what is lacking in our church and society and allow the hungers of our world to call us forth as the crowd called Jesus.

One of the most beautiful texts from the Second Vatican Council states, “The joys and hopes, the grief and sorrow of the people of our times, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and sorrow of the followers of Christ as well”.

We, the disciples of Christ, his followers, must look at our world and ask what deep and truly human hopes and hungers are being unconsciously expressed in the coarseness of political discourse that divides us; in the addictions that plague every strata of society; in the supremacy movements and all the “isms” that demean people.

Pope Francis puts the call clearly when he says, “I hope that all parish communities will devote the necessary effort to advance along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are. Quoting Mahatma Gandhi, he says, “Be the change you wish to see in the world”.

Our Teens, in going on mission to Pittsburgh, have taken these words to heart. I invite them to come forward, and like the Apostles did with Jesus, to please report to us all they have done and learned.