**4th Sunday of Easter (John 10:27-30)        Good Shepherd Sunday   8 May 2022**

**Our turn to Shepherd:** Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday because each year, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, the Gospel reading comes from some part of John’s Chapter 10 wherein Jesus compares himself to a shepherd. In today’s Gospel excerpt, Jesus is visiting the Temple when he is questioned by a group of Pharisees who ask Jesus to tell them plainly whether he is the Messiah or not. I imagine that Jesus’ response, describing himself as a shepherd, must have been somewhat of a surprise or even a disappointment to both his questioners and his followers. Shepherds spent the majority of their time in the fields with the live-stock, and tended to be an uneducated, dirty, smelly, and often boorish lot who held the bottom rung of status in the ancient world – sort of like deacons today.

We don’t have very many literal shepherds in our country. I wonder, if asked the same question today, might Jesus have compared himself to a mother instead. Mothers, especially those tending to their children at the toddler stage,  are very much like shepherds. Mothers care for and worry about their flock 24/7. Mothers raise us, provide for us, protect us, and bring us home when we wander off. On this mother’s day, we pause to say thank you to our mom’s for loving us and for shepherding us through the various stages of our lives.

Today’s gospel reminds us that like a shepherd, or our mother’s for that matter, Jesus always holds us in his hand - that he always cares for and watches over us. But, Jesus’ comparison to a shepherd is much more significant than a simple declaration of a loving caretaker. In John’s gospel, Jesus is in fact revealing his divinity.

 The connection between Jesus as shepherd and Messiah lies in chapter 34 of the book of the prophet Ezekiel. At that time, God, speaking through the prophet, condemns the shepherds of Israel as corrupt and sinful. And God declares in verse 11: “I myself will look after and tend to my sheep.” When Jesus reveals himself as shepherd, he is proclaiming himself as the fulfillment of that prophecy. But in case there is any doubt, Jesus then concludes with the clear and specific answer that: “the Father and I (he) are one.”

 The shepherd analogy wasn’t only intended for the Pharisees. Jesus is also preparing his disciples for their role as shepherds of the flock that is our Church. But as I'm sure we are aware, with each passing year, it seems that we have fewer and fewer men stepping up to the task of shepherding God’s flock. For this reason, in 1963, Pope Paul VI designated this Sunday as an annual worldwide day of prayer for vocations.  We need more priests. Priests, who in Pope Francis' words, are willing to go out among their flocks and know the people they serve like “shepherds living with the smell of the sheep.” Through our priestly shepherds, the flock will hear and recognize God's voice,  God’s grace will come alive and flourish.

     However, we simply cannot leave the self-sacrificing task of shepherding to the religious alone. To be a disciple of Jesus demands that we too tend to the Lord’s sheep. That we share the good news of the Easter season and its promise of salvation. That we respond to every person the same way that our heavenly Shepherd cares for each of us. Every person we encounter is a child of God, created in his likeness and is worthy of being treated with dignity.  Some days it can be as simple as a welcoming greeting and other days it will take more but it all begins with us being present amongst the flock, in addition to our priests.

For this reason, the charity of the Christian disciple must reach beyond his or her own family and friends and beyond the parish family as well.  Each of us is called to care for all of God’s lambs - because we are Christians, because we are all called to the task of shepherding.  The sheep should not be left to wander but should hear the Good Shepherd’s voice in our actions and through our actions, the Lord’s sheep should grow in confidence that they are still held in the safety of God’s hand.