

Date: April 17, 2005

**SUNDAY:** Easter 4

**SERMON: Wounded Healers**

Text(s): 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-11

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Last week, high school students across the nation received their scores from the newly revised SAT's, and now the analysis of whether or not the new test is good or bad is beginning. This is also the time of year when many high school seniors are getting their college acceptances and making their choices about where to continue their education after they graduate.

When I read a news article about the new SAT's, I was reminded of an episode of *Candid Camera*, that granddaddy of all reality TV shows, that focused on a high school senior named Steve as he went for an interview with his school guidance counselor to talk about what he might major in when he went to college and the possible career choices he might pursue, completely unaware, of course, that the *Candid Camera* crew was on the scene.

Steve was a bright student who excelled in math and science, so he expected the guidance counselor to say that he should consider a career in engineering or microbiology or something like that. Instead, he could hardly believe his ears when the counselor said, "Steve, we've gone over the results of the career test you took, and they show that you're just about perfectly suited to be a shepherd."

Poor Steve who was a city boy and wouldn't have known one end of a sheep from another, did a double-take and exclaimed, "A shepherd! You mean, like, with sheep and like that?"

"Exactly." said the counselor, "It's very clear from these results that you're perfectly suited to herding sheep."

Just then, while Steve was sitting there looking utterly befuddled, Allen Funt, the show's host appeared through the door and announced,

"Smile, you're on Candid Camera."

Despite the fact that here in Maine, we do have quite a number of people who raise sheep, I imagine most of us would have reacted much as Steve did if we were told we were perfectly suited to becoming a shepherd.

Herding sheep wouldn't be high up on our list of dream jobs, would it? And yet, the imagery of a shepherd caring for sheep has been one of the most consistently powerful and beloved images in our cultural vocabulary down through the centuries.

I suspect that the staying power of the image of shepherd and sheep in our culture up to this point has been mostly due to the fact that until the last couple of decades, so many people attended Sunday Schools where they saw pictures of Jesus cradling a lamb in his arms, or learned the parable Jesus told about the shepherd who goes searching for the one lost sheep. Many also learned Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd. . ." in church school as well. I also suspect that given the increasing secularization of our society and the relatively few people who send their children to Sunday School or have ever read the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, that image will soon lose, if it hasn't already, its place in our collective cultural psyche.

Even among church people, for whom this image is so deeply embedded in our minds and hearts, it has often become sentimentalized and trivialized, and its real import lost. It's one of those images that can give us the "warm fuzzies," without our ever really understanding what it means.

Both of our lessons this morning explore this image more deeply, without any of the Hallmark-card sentimentality. In the gospel lesson, Jesus speaks to his disciples and assures them that he is their Good Shepherd, and that as his sheep, they are the recipients of his special care, and that his goal is that his sheep "*may have life, and have it abundantly.*" But that life comes with a high price tag, as we hear in the final sentence of our passage: "*I am the Good*

*Shepherd; the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”* The commitment of the shepherd to care for and protect the sheep, even to the point of death is what defines this shepherd as the Good Shepherd. The author of our epistle lesson picks up on this theme, *“He himself bore our sins in his own body on the cross, so that freed from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.”* Down through the centuries, passages like this or Jesus’ parable of the Lost Sheep have moved Christians to see themselves as the lost sheep for whom the Good Shepherd laid down his life. And because of that, we see the sufferings of Jesus, not only as the human tragedy that they were, but as a tragedy that has produced a positive, redemptive result. That’s why, for instance, we speak of the day of Jesus’ crucifixion as “Good Friday.” It’s not that the brutal execution of an innocent man is a good thing; rather the goodness attaches to the meaning that death has come to have for our own lives. In the death of Jesus, our faith teaches us, we see how God fully identifies with our human experience of mortality and suffering. The death of Jesus speaks to us of the lengths God will go to search us out down all the dark and lonely pathways where we have wandered and bring us home. With good reason we treasure this metaphor of Jesus as our Shepherd and ourselves as his flock.

But this image of the Good Shepherd who suffers redemptively for the sheep has yet deeper depths to be plumbed. While affirming that Jesus is the Good Shepherd and we are the sheep who have been loved redemptively and sacrificially by him, then, as our epistle writer is quick to point out, we are immediately confronted by a call to become shepherds ourselves who love others just as redemptively and sacrificially. *“For to this you have been called, the writer says, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an*

*example that you should follow in his steps.*

If Jesus’ sufferings on behalf of his sheep are the model for our own lives, then we are immediately faced with the further question about the meaning and value of our own sufferings. I don’t mean only the sufferings that entail physical pain, but any of the dark or painful experiences of life that come upon us. What is the relationship between Jesus’ sufferings and ours? Between Jesus’ identity as the Good Shepherd and our calling to *“follow in his steps?”* This is precisely the question which the writer of our epistle lesson from I Peter is addressing. He was writing to Christians who were experiencing suffering. It may have been some local persecution, or it may have been the subtler, but no less painful suffering of breaches within families between those who were Christians and those who were not, or social ostracism or ridicule because they bore the name of Christian. But that they were suffering is beyond doubt.

The author of I Peter doesn’t spend any time trying to explain why we suffer. Being human, all of us experience suffering, and even though we often ask, “Why?” or more specifically, “Why me?” no one has yet come up with a wholly satisfactory answer to the question “Why do we suffer?” I don’t propose to attempt to offer one this morning. I’m not so sure that even if we could understand the ultimate origins of suffering that it would help us all that much anyway. The much more pressing question for us is how we find meaning in the midst of our sufferings and how we behave as a result of the meaning we find. Suffering does not so much require an explanation as it requires a response from us.

Our biblical writer assumes that being a Christian will involve one in suffering. If even someone as good as Jesus suffered, he implies, it’s very likely that his followers will too, and probably for much the same reasons. If we’re disciples of Jesus, then his vocation becomes our

vocation with all the consequent implications of that fact.

What the writer emphasizes here is not the “why” of Jesus’ sufferings, but rather his response in the midst of his sufferings. *“When he was reviled, he reviled not in turn, when he suffered, he did not threaten, but trusted himself to the One who judges justly.”* In other words, he consecrated his sufferings to God and trusted God to reveal the meaning in his sufferings.

Thomas Merton, one of the greatest spiritual guides of the past century, in his book *No Man Is An Island*, reminds us that suffering in itself is hateful and useless. Pain is never redemptive or meaningful in and of itself. It’s just a waste that leaves us diminished and often bitter and empty inside. Nothing becomes unholy so easily as suffering because it tends to make us focus all our attention on ourselves and imprison us within our own fears that our lives are meaningless. So the work of a Christian, he says, is to make our sufferings holy so that good can come from them, not directly, but as a by-product. When we consecrate ourselves to God in the midst of our sufferings, we can turn our sufferings into something redemptive for others, and therefore, meaningful for our own lives.

Listen to Merton’s words, *“When I see my trials, not as the collision of my life with a blind machine called Fate, but as the sacramental gift of Christ’s love, given to me by God along with my identity and my very name, then I can consecrate them and myself with them to God. For then I realize that my suffering is not my own. It is the Passion of Christ, stretching out its tendrils into my life in order to bear rich clusters of grapes, making my soul dizzy with the wine of Christ’s love, and pouring that wine as strong as fire upon the whole world.”*

Yet that consecration of ourselves and our sufferings to God, that trusting of ourselves to the One who judges justly, is only possible if we believe, as Jesus did, that the God to whom we

trust ourselves is the One who gives life to the dead. We can find the meaning in our sufferings, not because suffering has meaning in and of itself, but because trusting in the God who creates life out of death makes it possible for us to live in hope instead of in fear of death and meaninglessness.

This, I believe, is what our epistle writer means when he calls us to “follow in Christ’s steps.” We’re called to become wounded healers, to use Henri Nouwen’s classic phrase, for that is the only kind we can be. Christians are not people who escape the wounds that life and nature and evil inflict. Christians are people who, though wounded themselves, allow their wounds to be transformed into instruments of healing for others.

Whatever we may think of Pope John Paul’s policies or the directions in which he led the church, and I disagreed strongly with many of those policies and directions, he did give us a wonderful example of someone who discovered how to give his own sufferings redemptive meaning. Despite his own personal agonies in his last years and weeks, it was clear that his focus was on the welfare of his sheep rather than on himself. I imagine that most of us can think of someone we know personally who has exemplified for us what it means to be a “wounded healer.”

In the first new member class that I took in my first year at the American Church in Paris, there was a couple who had just arrived from the U.S. Rick was sent to head up a division of what was then Allied Signal Corporation. As I got to know him and Cindy, they shared with me that they were members of a club that no one ever chooses or wishes to join— parents who have lost their children. When their first-born son was two years old, they discovered that he had an incurable genetically-based disease that meant that he would most likely not live beyond the age of 10. But they only discovered this when Cindy was already pregnant with their second child, and

this was in the days before abortions were legal. And so their worst fears were realized when their second son was also born with the same disease.

They spent the next twelve years caring for those two increasingly disabled little boys, suffering through the older one's death at age 10 just as predicted, and two years later, the death of their younger son at the same age.

That kind of loss could have broken their marriage and their spirits, as it has so many others, and it very nearly did. They went through some awful times. But even in their worst times, their knowledge of their identity as members of the Good Shepherd's flock, sustained them. They began to search for some redemptive meaning in this tragedy that had overcome them. They trusted that with God's help and the help of their Christian community, they could discover that meaning.

They became involved in a fledgling organization called Compassionate Friends, which was a support network for bereaved parents. Over the next few years, they devoted a great deal of time and energy into expanding the organization, and Rick eventually wound up becoming the national president. When they were sent to France, they shared with me that one of their goals for their time in Paris was begin a chapter of Compassionate Friends there. And they did; they began to gather in others who were struggling to survive the loss of a child. They were wounded healers, accepting their vocation to follow in the steps of the Good Shepherd and minister to other lost and hurting sheep.

In a very real sense, all of us are suited for the vocation of a shepherd, and not just on *Candid Camera*. If we are called to follow the Good Shepherd, who is good precisely because he lays down his life for the sheep, then that laying down of our lives for others becomes our vocation as well. And in the end, what else do we really have to offer the world? It is not by our brilliance or by the strength of our arguments or

by the exercise of power that we will transform the world. What we have to offer is our wounds—wounds that we can make holy by consecrating them to God for the sake of others. In that way, we will offer other lost and wounded sheep, other sufferers, a place to come in and feed in green pastures and lie down beside still waters.