1. Intro: honoring parents

Many years ago one of my directees asked me a question about the 10 Commandments. She asked, how can I honor my father and mother, when my father was abusive? And I gave a standard and fair answer: we talked about what it means to honor anyone, and we looked at the Catechism which suggests that the Command might refer to elders in general, and we talked about abuse, and I asked whether she had received any professional work on that, and so forth.

That was standard pastoral procedure, and I think it helped: especially the referral.

If someone came to me with that same question today, I would proceed in much the same way.

Except for the Scriptural part. Instead I would refer to today’s Gospel:

10:37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me…

Because that is a better Pastoral answer.

Most people I know would say no it is not. It is in fact un-pastoral of Jesus o say that, in fact it just about sounds unchristian, and most preachers find this whole passage a nightmare to work with, and why would I then hand the seeker his sentence, and so forth.

Then let me answer that new question: why would I use this sentences of Jesus--10:37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me…

--and why do I call that disturbing saying pastora? Because that is what I would like to think about with you today—what is a pastor, and what is pastoral care.

1. The Pastor

What is a Pastor? What is pastoral care?

A.

Most would say pastoral care is being a kind, nurturing, healing, and affirming presence, who cares for us when we are hurting and heals us when we are ailing. And a good pastor would be someone who is good at those things: understanding, empathetic, soothing, hand-holding, soft in the voice, the opposite of threatening.

Everybody likes that, and everybody needs that from time to time. When we are sick in body mind or spirit, that is often—though not always—just what we need.

But that is a most incomplete picture of a Pastor, a quite partial definition.

The word comes directly from the Bible, Pastors are in it from Genesis to he letters in the NT, and it is one of the key symbols in the Gospels.

For *pastor* is, simply, the Latin word for “shepherd,” and they are everywhere in Scripture. A few weeks ago we celebrated what is nicknamed “good shepherd Sunday,” and we could call it “good pastor Sunday” without changing a thing.

And **that** is why I say the gentle healer is a very partial understanding of the pastor. A shepherd, especially in the traditional world, certainly did heal the sheep. He or she served in other words as a kind of veterinarian, and knew how to treat sheepwhen they got stomach problems or got injured. In fact shepherds had medicines in their kit and knew how to apply them when the sheep needed that kind of care.

Bu if you stopped there with your job profile for a shepherd, anyone in Jesus’ world would definitely have said, yes, but, but you are leaving a great deal out, it is a lot more than that. The shepherd was more than a **full-time** animal doctor.

B.

For one thing, he was also the defender of the flock, the one who protects from danger. As Fr. Patrick pointed out in his excellent sermon this past Good Shepherd Sunday, this is why Jesus called himself the “gate” to the sheepfold: because a good shepherd would lie down across the opening of the cave or whatever enclosure where the sheep would sleep, and thus stand or rather lie between them and the thieves and the wolves.

Now note this well: we said that our usual idea of a pastor was this: **understanding, empathetic, soothing, hand-holding, soft in the voice, the opposite of threatening.** These are **not** the qualities we want in a man or woman who stands guard while we sleep. No, we would want her to be brimming with heart, brave, handy with that shepherd’s staff, and quite willing to get bit or bruised if she needed to be to protect us.

If sheep want a good shepherd, we want a woman who is **both** strong enough to protect us, gentle enough to heal us, and smart enough to know which is which and why and when.

C.

But I have still left something out of my portrait of a real-life shepherd. In fact, I have left out the thing shepherds spent much more time doing than healing and protecting put together.

And that is *leading*.

Any shepherd worth his wages knew how to lead well, knew at sunrise where to take that flock he guarded through the night for safe and good grazing, knew where they should go to run and play, knew when to migrate to fresh territory when the grass was giving out, knew the difference between rain which the sheep could endure better than we can and a bad storm where they needed to be brought back to shelter, knew where the cliffs were and where the hills were and where the streams and the lakes were, and knew how to move those big, lazy, and not too intelligent animals to the proper places—pigs you know and even goats are smarter than sheep, only chickens are denser farm animals.

In short a good shepherd knew where to go and how to get them there. She had to be—before she was a healer and a guardian—a leader. So a good shepherd had be yes gentle and healing and yes courageous and hardy but above all she had to have vision—you must have vision to lead, because you must know where your flock needs to go, and you need to see it before you get there.

1. Jesus’ Pastoral work

Now let us turn from the symbol to what or rather whom it stands for—Jesus. You see Jesus admitted he was Son of God, Messiah, and King of the Jews; he knew also that he was the Servant who suffers, and that the great secret was that the servant and the deliverer would be one and the same.

But when he talked about himself, he called himslf1 the Son of Man, 2 the Vine, and 3 the Good Shepherd. Each of those is a big sermon, and you already know which one this is. The firs Christians knew—in he catacombs, Jesus appears as the Good Shepherd first.

**How**, therefore, was Jesus the Good Shepherd?

Most people again will think this refers to when **he**was **understanding, empathetic, soothing, healing nonthreatening.**

Well, he definitely was a gentle healer. He certainly was veterinarian to whatever sheep he came across. If you cameto him with leprosy or blindness or paralysis, he in his Godly compassion healed you. I can’t think of a single case where he referred someone to a specialist, which today we almost always expect our GPs to do.

Was he really the one lying across the threshold? Well, most vividly he was. For one thing he set people free from demons, which is roughly spiritually like the boy shepherd David fighting off lions and wolves with his staff and his sling shot.

More importantly, he protected his sheep from the more insidious dangers of twisted notions of God, from the notion for example those who believed that following the rules of the Torah was most pleasing to God, as though God had never spoken through Hosea and Isaiah: When Jesus said “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” he was alluding to Hosea:

“faithful love is what pleases me, not sacrifice; [knowledge](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=6682) of God, not burnt offerings.”

But like the shepherd he was, he led. He literally led some disciples—they literally went from place to place with him, they followed his lead to Jerusalem. He knew where he was going and how to lead his sheep there.

More importantly, he was the great spiritual leader, shepherd of souls. A leader takes followers from point A to point B. “You have heard it said… but I say to you…” Sound familiar? He said that kind of thing often but it’s most focused most concentrated in the Sermon on the Mount.

That is not healing, not protecting, that is leading, and that is what the Good Shepherd most often does. And it what Jesus did with he disciples all the time.

1. This Parish

Where now are we, in this scheme of things? Well, when you worked and prayed to find John David—and God answered your prayers—I don’t know what you were saying because I stayed out of it. But I have been in on the process in other places and have been the victim I mean the **subject** of a parish search in other places.

And I have heard other parishes say 3 things. And in no particular order; they all are equally important—so they say.

They all say we want good preaching. They **all** say that; I’ve never heard any parish ever anywhere say well preaching is not all that important to us so we don’t really care.

And they all say we want leadership or we want a leader. And the diocesan helpers always say great so important, good thing. But they leave out something crucial—where do you want to go? Any idea? What kind of place do you wish to be led to? When Connie and I were exploring in south France a year ago, we’d often ask for directions, and always got them. But the most helpful people were the ones who said not turn right at the lights then go another kilometer and turn left, but the ones who said come with me, I’ll lead you there. You see we had some idea where we wanted to go but not exactly how to get there and what to expect. Leadership was much appreciated.

And finally all parishes say we want nothing to change. Oh, we want to grow, we want more people in pews, we want a bigger income. We are quite willing to share this wonderful gift we have.

But our new leader must not change things. He or she must maintain this beautiful but fragile gift.

In other words excuse me sir, I need directions. Can you be our guide? Gladly. Where do you want to go? Oh, we do not want to go anywhere. We would like to stay right here.

In still other words I want a leader. But I do not want to be led.

Maybe your conversation was different. But I was seminarian here forty years ago and the rector then was the most ornate High Churchman you could imagine. If you think we are High Church now, you should have seen us then. Half of what we did on any ordinary Sunday I cannot even remember. A practicing Roman Catholic said to me, wow, I’ve never seen anything like this, what’s going on?

But that same rector who was doing all this ritual flawlessly (I suppose), told me once in private he was frustrated. Why? Because, he said, no one will let me lead here. I want all sorts of changes that would make things healthier, better. But no one wants leadership. They just want maintenance.

We have that rich Anglo Catholic tradition behind us. We, or I suppose I should now start saying you, also have a visually stunning worship space—maybe the most beautiful in town, and this is a big town. You have also a tradition of social outreach, of conscience, that in recent years has started to breathe a little again. You have a fine sermon tradition—the former rector told me once that Little Church is known throughout for her sermons. Many of you have been kind to me about mine but I can tell you in truth I will miss Fr Patrick and Fr John David’s vivid, careful, powerful, theologically strong, great sermons, that has ben one of the great joys for me, listening to those. Again even though small you have one of the most dynamic and vital music programs in town, and in Claudia the most versatile and also the most technically gifted musician around—she can lead everything from the gigantic ensemble at the great feast days to the cherub choir.

And also you have the warmest spirit I have known in any parish, and you are also the most intelligent.

But, as someone better than I once said, one thing you lack. Or you may well have it but are reluctant to show it and develop it. And that is vision. How are you going to form that great music, that rich high churchmanship, that social conscience, those artistic treasure, that intelligence, and that warm spirit into a vital mission? How are you going to focus everything you see around you into a coherent vision? You have been in wonderful places, you are in a great place now; where are you going?

V. In conclusion

Dom David Knowles said in spirituality, as in love, there is no maintenance. There is only moving forward, or there is dying.

You have, in your clergy and in your vestry and in your music and in your altar party everything and more, you are unusually blessed. So when you find yourself bruised, as St Hildegard said, you will find ointment for your soul. When the dangers of bad Christianity rise up, you have defenders here, and I mean John David and Patrick especially, who will defend you from what St Ignatius calls that poison in honeyed wine.

But you also have the potential to get somewhere. St Nilus said tradition is not a chain to shackle you to the past, it’s a vine to nourish you into the future. Feed on that vine; look into that future.