

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER (B)
Acts 4: 8-12 Psalm 118 1 John 3: 1-2 John 10: 11-18
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE: We have posted a review of a recently revised biography of Thomas Merton on our webpage. Go to: <https://PreacherExchange.com> and click on the “Book Review” tab on the left.

Jesus says he knows his sheep. The way God knows him, and he knows God – that is the way he knows us. Jesus will say later in John’s gospel that, “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (10:38). Can we ever grasp the significance for our lives of what Jesus is saying? The relationship between Jesus and his followers is like the intimate relationship between Jesus and the Father!

Remember too, that in John’s gospel Jesus is called “the Lamb of God.” He was like a sheep among us, snatched up and slaughtered for our sake. Jesus knows us, not in an abstract way, or even as the creator of a work of art intimately knows his/her creation. Rather, when he says, “I know mine and mine know me...,” his knowledge of us comes from his becoming one of us, living among us and taking on our death.

It is clear, in John’s gospel, that Jesus’ life wasn’t taken from him; nor was it inevitable. He allowed this to happen, for he reminds us, “No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own!” His death is the result of his free will; he chose to serve the needy and despised, the outcasts and sinners. He wouldn’t back down from what God wanted him to do for us, and so he was killed. He certainly revealed where God’s heart lies – on the side of those lost and in need. Jesus shows us that God continues to be what God has always been for us – the Good Shepherd. But we see in Jesus’ life not just what God wanted him to do for us but, empowered by his Spirit, what we are to do for others, to offer our lives as disciples of the Good Shepherd.

When Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd” he is making a point. The image of shepherd is rich in both testaments of the Bible. God is called shepherd (e.g. Psalm 23), as are the leaders of Israel. There’s the rub. Certainly, Jesus isn’t suggesting God isn’t also a good shepherd. But Israel had more than its share of poor, corrupt

and oppressive leadership. Israel had shepherds who took care of themselves first – neglecting the sheep entrusted to them. So, in calling himself the “good shepherd” Jesus is contrasting himself to all the others who have neglected their task of guiding God’s flock.

We modern church people can’t help but squirm at Jesus’ reference to his being a good shepherd, since recent revelations of some poor leadership in our church and the damage done to innocents, have left us with wounds that may never fully heal. Students of church history can also present similar examples of failed shepherds in past ages. Being chosen shepherd, as we know, is not an automatic stamp of perfection. Jesus spells out what makes him a good shepherd – love for his sheep and his placing them first, even ahead of his own life. He is willing to surrender himself up for his sheep.

If we reflect on what Jesus said, then: when we come face to face with our shortcomings; the compromises we make; the feelings of inadequacy we have about our discipleship; the doubts in faith that creep up on us at certain crucial moments – rather than shrink back from Jesus in embarrassment, withdraw from praying, disengage from service, claim “unworthiness” – Jesus’ words should encourage us. Someone who loves us enough to give his life for us, is telling us that he knows us at our deepest level and therefore understands our weakness. The Good Shepherd has called us to continue his care for others. It will not be our own worthiness, that will enable us to shepherd others well; be constant in service; give of ourselves to those most needy, rather it is the life Jesus has laid down for us. Through Baptism and again at this Eucharist, his life is now our life. His spirit of service and his love for his sheep are now ours.

We pray for our bishops at this Eucharist, those we call the official shepherds of the flock; who carry the shepherd’s staff, the crozier, we see at our gatherings. Despite the present painful revelations about the failed leadership of some, we recall those bishops whose past prophetic statements for the poor and peace and justice have opened our eyes and challenged us to live the gospel in our complex world. While we have large numbers of educated laity in the church, we still want our bishops to speak and teach us with the compassion of the Good Shepherd. With so many places of conflict and the growing number of poor in the world; the dire economic needs of our neighbors here in this country and the threats to permanent damage to our environment, etc., we need, more than ever, their prophetic voices to call us to gospel living and faithful stewardship. Let us pray

for the National Conference of Catholic bishops in their shepherding ministry to us and the world.

We have seen and continue to see, many examples of good shepherds in our modern world; men and women willing to risk their own lives for the wellbeing of the poor, needy and abused. Some well-known people come to mind: Archbishop Romero, Dorothy Day, the four Maryknoll women martyrs of El Salvador, Cardinal Bernadine, Pope John Paul II, etc. There are so many more whom we know locally, those everyday church workers who show great love for the needy. Because of their example they gather people who want to follow and work with them to help others.

Look around at the assembly gathered with you for worship today – how many good shepherds can you count? They are reason to give praise and thanks to God that the risen Jesus is still in our midst, in his servants, shepherding us. Let's not forget to number among the good shepherds those "professional" church workers in our parishes who don't make a big salary and work more than the required 40 hours a week in service. They too lay down their lives for the sheep, often at great costs to themselves.

Can you hear in today's gospel echoes of the ancient promise God made to the Israelites? "Then I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Ex 6:7). Today Jesus repeats that promise in a new way to a new people. "I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me." The same faithful God is repeating the covenantal promise: to be our God, travel across the vast desert with us and feed us our daily bread – which is what God is doing for us today at this Eucharist.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

LIVING WITH WISDOM: A LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON (Revised edition)

Jim Forest (New York: Orbis Books, 2008) Paper, 262 pages. US \$22.00.

This biography is not only told in words, but in a wonderful collection of pictures and quotes from Merton's writings. One gets to travel with Merton, not just geographically, but spiritually, as he evolves from a college dandy, through his

conversion and entrance into the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemani. We witness his emergence as a spiritual writer as well as a prophetic voice for peace and justice as well as his struggles to be faithful to his vocation, first as a monk, then as a hermit within the monastery. This book makes great Eastertime reading!

QUOTABLE

What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows! Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.

—Thomas Merton, quoted in “Living With Wisdom.”

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

**I am the good shepherd,
and I know mine and mine know me,
just as the Father knows me and I know the Father,
and I will lay down my life for the sheep.**

Reflection:

We can see many modern examples in our world of good shepherds; men and women willing to see to the well being of the poor, uneducated, lost and injured. There are also many more such shepherds, closer at hand. Look around at those gathered with you for worship today – how many good shepherds can you count? They are the reasons to give praise and thanks to God, because in his servants, the risen Jesus is still in our midst, shepherding us.

So we ask ourselves:

Through whom have I experienced the presence of the Good Shepherd in my life?
Am I being called to be a shepherd to someone in need? How?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

Migrant Farm Workers

Today we hear Jesus refer to himself as the “Good Shepherd”. We are also familiar with other references in the Gospels to farming images, like “vines”, “fig trees”, “sowing seeds” and “harvesting”. We who in most cases live far removed from a rural life style, have little experience with shepherds or farmers. This is so because in most cases it is not our own labor, but rather the labor of tens of thousands of migrant farm workers who provide us with fresh fruits and vegetables all season long. As the growing season begins in North Carolina we are called to be aware of the hidden and difficult lives of these men and women who are Christ’s presence among us. Christ journeys with them as they search for a more hopeful future and a welcoming community. In committing ourselves to the service of all uprooted people, we build up the Kingdom of God.

Did you know?

- North Carolina migrant workers are sometimes exposed to heat indices of 105-110 degrees without the opportunity to adequately hydrate or cool down?
- North Carolina migrant workers regularly suffer skin and respiratory infections from exposure to pesticides.
- Sometimes babies born to farm worker families suffer severe birth defects and death as a result of the pesticide exposure of their parents.

What can I do?

- Be informed and speak out in support of the following farm worker justice issues:
 - o Labor law, wage and hour reforms, and better enforcement of current laws for agricultural workers;
 - o Immigration reforms to help undocumented workers adjust to legal status
 - o Restoration of federal benefits to legal immigrants;
 - o Support for adequate federal and state funding for rural housing, and for existing programs such as migrant health, English as a second language instruction and education and enforcement of the laws which govern the use of pesticides.
 - Watch the Justice Bulletin Board for specific local and federal legislative lobbying opportunities on behalf of farm worker justice.
 - Sign up to help this summer when Sacred Heart prepares meals and serves the migrant farm workers. It is a joyful experience.
 - When you buy fresh fruits and vegetables, think of those who harvested them and say a prayer for them and their families. Advocate on their behalf when possible.
- (Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, *"People of Faith Against the Death Penalty"* If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- Timothy Richardson #0492102 (On death row since 6/1/95)
- Richard Cagle #0061528 (6/16/95)
- William Herring #0180479 (7/22/95)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you. -

"Blessings on your preaching" - Jude Siciliano, OP - FrJude@JudeOP.org