

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER MAY 11  
Acts 4: 8-12 Psalm 118 1 John 3: 1-2 John 10: 11-18  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Once I was in a small rural parish community in West Virginia and reflected on today’s Good Shepherd passage with a small group of parishioners consisting of coal mining and farming families. In this very hilly part of Appalachia there wasn’t a lot of flat land for crops, so they raised sheep and goats on the steep hillsides. During our session one of the farmers asked, “If you had a hundred sheep in a pasture and one jumped over the fence, how many would you have left?” Everyone chuckled, they seemed to know the answer. We didn’t have sheep in the Brooklyn neighborhood where I grew up—not enough pasture land! So, I was the one who asked the farmer, “How many?” He replied, “None, sheep are so dumb, if one jumps over the fence the others all follow.” That’s about as much as I know about sheep. Can’t say I feel complimented then when I am considered “one of the sheep” in today’s gospel images of shepherds and sheep.

But I do feel comforted by knowing whether I am a dumb sheep having made all kinds of stupid mistakes in my life, or if I am under siege and threat of any kind, that I will not be written off or abandoned by the One who really knows me. He has already sealed this promise with his blood-- a promise signed in blood.

When we were kids we would prick our fingers and press them to each other’s fingers and make a blood promise—“friends forever.” I don’t know where those kids I solemnly swore an eternal bond to when I was ten, are today: living or dead; happy or bored; married, widowed or single. Our solemn oath didn’t even survive our teenage years when we went separate ways in high school. But Jesus stays by us, his cross and his blood remind us that he has made and will keep his covenant with us. We don’t have to be smart, successful, good-looking, own a house or a boat, be at the top of our company, optimistic or a charmer, for him to continue walking out ahead of us. What he asks is that we design our lives to hear his voice. That we listen with hopeful- ears to the words proclaimed at this Sunday eucharist; try to reflect on what he is saying to us amid the calm, noisy or chaotic moments of our lives; pray with some regularity and listen for his voice when in the company of his favorites, the least, the poor and the outsider.

Even people who do not know a lot of scripture can probably quote a verse or two from the 23<sup>rd</sup>. Psalm. It is a favorite at funerals, offering comfort to grieving family and friends--“The Lord is my Shepherd”... “the valley of the shadow of death”... “green pastures”... “still waters” ... “Your rod and your staff”... “I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.” We are reminded in a special way during these Sundays of the resurrected Christ. It is tempting to think of the resurrection as having only happened a long time ago; but during the eucharist prayer today we proclaim, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” We aren’t thinking, “back then,” when the Good Shepherd once guided his flock. We are professing in our proclamation that he continues to do that for us and will continue to do so, right up to his return, someday, when he will gather us together, “one flock, one shepherd.”

The image of the Good Shepherd was the most popular and earliest image of Christ and probably still is. We see stained glass windows, statues and paintings of him. Hospitals, churches, schools and soup kitchens bear the title, “Good Shepherd.” In artistic renderings of Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, he looks so tranquil, other-worldly, his manner of dress quaint, from a past age that’s long gone. He seems removed from the daily fray of our lives; he’s someone we pray to, who loves us, but the images of him make him appear above our struggles. That’s the sense of him we get from some religious art; but it is not the way the gospels depict him. They remind us that he wasn’t removed or above our lives; he entered fully into our human condition. He knew friendships and love, meals with his family and friends, wedding celebrations and companionship on the road. He also knew the death of those he loved disappointment in his project and the betrayal of the ones who had professed loyalty to him. He knew suffering and death. He also knew what it means to sacrifice for another---all the way to giving his life for us. He says today, “ I will lay down my life for the sheep.” This was no idle boast; it became a harsh reality for him.

For those of us who have been taught by loving parents, generosity, love and service to others, we know that the Good Shepard is not merely in stained glass. For through our parents’ voices and example we have heard the voice of the Good Shepherd speaking to us. Whenever we hear those parental voices in our memories, still showing us the right thing to do, we are being guided by the Shepherd. We have had other good influences in our lives: family elders, teachers and friends who have been our mentors. We know that the Good Shepherd is not just a stained-glass figure, for we have heard him in them as well.

In my travels as a preacher, I have met lots of other shepherds. I meet them in the priests, sisters, brothers and laity who staff parishes, retreat centers, university chaplaincies, halfway houses for the needy and homeless, etc. There are also many less “official” shepherds, those who “tend the flock.” Lots of lay people who create and direct first communion and confirmation programs; train lectors and eucharistic ministers; lead choirs; tend to parish finances and administer whole parishes where priests are scarce. We do not lack for shepherds in the church. Like the Good Shepherd, whose voice they so obviously hear, they lay down their lives for their sheep in sacrifices of time, energy and money. They too are helping us become one flock under the one Shepherd. All this shepherding-energy in the church! Where else would all this come from, except from the Good Shepherd, who continues, in the sacrifice of so many, to lay down his life for his sheep?

The Spirit of this Good Shepherd is constantly calling shepherds to serve in his church, the flock he still guides. Through all of us whom he called---and is calling--- he is guiding his flock along right paths, still healing their wounds, still clothing their bodies, still making us one flock with one Shepard--- just as he promised.

#### FOR THE PREACHER

Hilkert, Mary Catherine, O.P. "Naming Grace: A Theology of Proclamation," Worship, Vol. 60, No.5, September 1986, 433-449.

*To create and proclaim a homily the preacher needs a sound theology of preaching. This article speaks to an important need, a contemporary theology of preaching from a Catholic perspective. The focus for reflection is the Incarnation, that God's Word and actions cannot be separated. The preacher then is called to "name the grace" in human experience.*

-----Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination. New York: Continuum, 1997.

Provides a solid theological background for preaching from a Catholic perspective drawing from the “sacramental imagination”. In addition, women’s experience of the Word and the effects of social location on hearing and preaching are also explored. A must-read, especially for preachers in the Catholic tradition.

QUOTABLE  
(from a letter from friends)

Our lives are quite busy as we try to live a normal life in a time of war. We yearn for a simpler time and safety for our loved ones. Since that is not to be, we try to “carpe diem,” hug our kids and grandkids, call our families, remember our loved ones and always pray for peace.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.”  
Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Lorenza Norwood #0304240 (On death row since 6/17/94)
  - Kenneth L. Boyd #0040519 (7/14/94)
  - Marcus Robinson #0348505 (8/5/94)
- Alden Harden #0166056 (8/12/94)  
-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 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](mailto:FrJude@JudeOP.org)