

Fourth Sunday of Easter
St. Mary's Church, Richmond, VA
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It happened in the parking lot at Barnes and Noble. I was sitting in my car listening to the last verses of the Elvis tune that was on the radio. And that is when it happened – I saw a young boy, maybe 4 years old, run slightly ahead of his mom. The little boy did not pay attention to the traffic in the lot.

Mom saw it first...then I saw it...the boy was running right into the path of a car. Mom yelled, ran toward the boy, and as the car approached, Mom grabbed the boy by the arm, pulled him out of the way...then she turned toward the oncoming car, put out her hand like this, and yelled STOP! And the car stopped. The teenaged driver of the car, still on her cell phone, seemed perturbed that her progress had been halted by an irate mom.

For a moment, the scene was frozen before me. There was the car, there was the little boy. And mom was smack in the middle. She had seen the danger, pulled him out of the way, and, without a second-thought, she put herself *between* her son and the danger. She had not hesitated. Her reaction told me a truth about her life – she was willing to die for the safety of her child. Literally. She was willing to die to keep him safe.

Why am I telling you this story? Well, on one hand, it's because I want to start a new, nationwide organization called "*Hang Up the Danged Cell Phone and Pay Attention to Your Driving!*" (Not really.)

I *am* telling this story because, in tonight's second reading, The Book of Revelation tells us that Jesus, the Lamb who is our shepherd, will "shelter" us. Our risen shepherd will nurture and protect us, Scripture says, and he will wipe every tear from our eyes. Jesus himself echoes this language in today's Gospel passage, where he likens his own ministry to that of the shepherd who calls out to his sheep, and, if the sheep hearken to his voice, they shall 'never perish.' This is beautiful stuff!

But... there's a problem. In the New Testament, the image of the SHEPHERD has played a key role in our understanding of who Jesus is and what he means for us. He is the shepherd. We are the sheep.

So what's the problem? For most Americans in the 21st century, that image of the shepherd has almost no grounding in our daily experience. How many of you have a relative who is a shepherd? How many sheep are there in Short Pump? Do you know how a shepherd works, or how a shepherd smells? Do you ever dream that some day, your son or daughter will go to Virginia Tech and grow up to be... a shepherd? When Jesus first spoke these words, everyone in that audience knew a shepherd. But how can we experience the power of this biblical image?

Well, we could rely on Hallmark cards or stained glass. Or, we could go back to the parking lot at Barnes and Noble, back to that woman who was willing to risk death for her child. SHE was being a shepherd, “sheltering” her son, as Scripture says. She was willing to lay down her life for what was important to her. And perhaps that is the key to this biblical image, because in another verse of John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” He lays down his life.

Even if the image of the shepherd does not resonate with your daily life in the West End, you instinctively understand the scene I described at Barnes and Noble. Jesus is trying to help us understand how much he loves us. How much? Like that mom in the parking lots, and like shepherds of old, Jesus is willing to throw himself between us and the enemies which seek to harm us. He is willing to lay down his life, on Calvary, so that death cannot grab hold of us and keep hold of us forever.

Do you get it? Sin and death come hurtling toward humanity, and Jesus is willing to step right in the middle, pull us to safety, hold up those hands of his which still bear the wounds of Calvary’s nails, and he shouts at death, STOP. He shouts at death, “You cannot have my children forever.” How much does he love us? So much, that he throws himself in front of us, lays down his life for us.

Meditate on that this week. And then ask yourself: if Christ loves me that much, then how dare I take him from granted? If Christ loves me that much, then how dare I begrudge him the little time I spend in prayer, the little time I spend in service, the little time I give to the Gospel? If Christ loves me that much, what does that require of me in response?

And another thing I’d like to ask you to meditate on this week. Who, or what, are you willing to die for? Is there anyone in your life who would bring out the same reaction as that mom in the parking lot? What in your life is so central that you would give everything for them?

Do you have people like that in your life? If so, remind them of how much you love them this week. And if so, the love you feel for them gives you a glimpse into the love that God has for you. Whenever you love someone or something that completely, then you are becoming a shepherd, a ‘shelterer’ of souls, willing to lay down your life for the ones you love. Thank God for the people in your life whom you love that fiercely.

And then...and then recall that the risen Christ has commanded us to try to love ALL OF GOD’S CHILDREN, with that same kind of love. There are some folks we would give our lives for without a second thought. But the call of this Easter season is to give some very serious thought to the deeper question – how can I learn to love EVERYONE that way? How is God’s spirit calling us to become shepherds of God’s sheep in war-torn regions, in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, in places where loneliness, illness or sadness seem to be rushing toward people in a dangerous way?

Not an easy message for a beautiful Spring day. But perhaps the challenge of this message can help us reconnect with the power of this great biblical image. Jesus Christ is your shepherd and your shelter. He loves you so much that he will give everything, risk everything, in order to stand between us and whatever harms us. He loves his children. And we are ALL his children. So hang up that cell phone, pay attention to who's around you, and come to altar to be nourished by his love.