

Homily for April 26, 2026 (Acts 2.14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 2.20b-25; John 10.1-10)

As [you are probably aware/Father already mentioned], today – the Fourth Sunday of Easter – is traditionally known as *Good Shepherd Sunday*. Most of the prayers and readings that are specific to today's liturgy refer, in some fashion, to sheep or to shepherds. For example, this was the collect – the opening prayer – we heard at the beginning of Mass:

Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before.

If we grew up coming to church and listening to the Bible, we are probably rather familiar with the *language* of sheep-herding. On the other hand, most of us – myself included – have very little experience with actual, physical sheep. It is worth taking a moment to consider why Jesus refers to himself specifically as a shepherd – rather than a

cowherd, or a goatherd, or a swineherd. Why did he choose sheep, in particular?

People who have spent a good deal of time on farms tell me that what makes sheep distinctive – in contrast to other barnyard animals – is that they are the *least* able to take care of themselves. Left to their own devices, they will get lost in the woods, or fall off a cliff, or get devoured by wild beasts. A few years ago, there was a video circulating around the internet, which started off with a sheep stuck in a ditch. After someone painstakingly pulled it out, the sheep immediately ran away and *leapt* back into the same ditch. That is a perfect image for how most of us live our lives. There are countless ditches into which we might fall: anger, jealousy, laziness, resentment, despair – just to name a few. The real problem is that – no matter how many times we get pulled out – our *overwhelming* tendency is to jump right back into the same ditch we just escaped.

This perspective does not exactly lead to an optimistic outlook on the human condition. There is one fact, though, that should give us all cause for hope. Even though sheep are the *least* self-sufficient of the domesticated animals, they are the creatures with the *closest* relationship to the people who care for them. It has been shown, time and time again, that sheep can recognize the particular voices of their shepherds. Christ himself makes this point in today's Gospel: "[the shepherd] walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice." When a shepherd is careful and attentive, his sheep will thrive and prosper. This is one of the most prominent themes of Good Shepherd Sunday. It is not just that we are foolish and prone to falling into ditches, but that we have a wise and loving shepherd who is constantly ready to pull us out.

The most important lesson, of course, is that our Shepherd is not just an ordinary sheep-herder. He is Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God. Not only does he take care of his sheep, not only do his sheep recognize his voice, but his work as a shepherd is utterly selfless. He is

not looking to obtain *anything* from his flock – he has no need of milk or wool, or anything else they might produce. His sole motivation is love – a love so intense that he willingly “lays down his life for his sheep.” No other shepherd on earth would do the same.

Pay particular attention to a prayer we will be hearing in a few minutes, shortly after we receive Holy Communion:

Look upon your flock, kind Shepherd, and be pleased to settle in eternal pastures the sheep you have redeemed by the Precious Blood of your Son.

There is no force in the *universe* as powerful as the self-sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. As Christians, our fundamental imperative is to surrender ourselves fully to his love – allowing it to refashion us in *his* image. By hearkening to the voice of the Good Shepherd, and by prostrating ourselves before his throne, we too – poor helpless sheep that we are – may hope to be washed clean by the saving power of his blood.