Homily for 4th Sunday of Easter 2015
April 26, 2015
Readings:  AA 4.8-12, Ps. 117, 1 Jn 3:1-2, Jn 10:11-18
Place:  Stella Niagara
Theme:  Good Shepherd Sunday
Mood:  Instructive and reflective

A dozen years ago, I served as pastor of a rural parish in Maryland. In anticipation of Good Shepherd Sunday, I asked a parishioner who raised cattle if he knew somebody who raised sheep. He did, and the parishioner offered to arrange for me to visit one of his neighbors.

The next day, I drove to this neighbor property. I parked my car, and walked about 100 feet to the farmhouse. The sheep farmer’s wife stepped out of the house and on to the porch, and shouted to me, “Why do you want to learn about the dumbest animal that God ever created?”

On the porch I met the husband and wife, and then he and I headed out to his sheepfold. The farmer reported to me a few things about sheep. Sheep are dumb. They have no designated leader among the herd. Whichever one sheep happens to leave the sheep-shelter first, the rest of the sheep simply get in line and follow. Perhaps singular among the animal kingdom, sheep are completely defenseless; they have neither claws nor strong jaws. They can race away or fly away. When a predator approaches, the sheep cluster and cower in a corner. The predator takes however many sheep he may want. It is very interesting that Jesus calls us “sheep.”

In an open grazing field, the shepherd looks for a protective place where the sheep might stay overnight. The shelter oftentimes consists of a cave or a rock over-hang. In front of that space some previous shepherd may have built a three foot high rock barrier on top of which the shepherd would place brambles and thorn bushes. The opening in the wall is called the sheep-gate, where the sheep enter and leave. This small opening is where the shepherd sleeps all night, to protect his sheep from predators. In Jesus’ time and still now, being a shepherd in Israel is not a prestigious career: it requires little skill, but much hard work, much caring, and at times, much courage. Interestingly, Jesus describes himself as “shepherd of the sheep.”

The Old and New Testaments make frequent references to sheep and shepherds. In the Pentateuch, we read that sheep are the customary sacrificial victims, and always on the menu for the Passover meal. In the Suffering Servant chapters, Isaiah writes, “Like a lamb he was led to the slaughter, or a sheep before the shearer, he was silent and opened not his mouth. (Is 53:7) The Church, of course, applies these Old Testament themes to Christ. John the Baptist pointed out Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God.” (Jn 1:29) In the Book of Revelation, Jesus is referred to as Lamb, 28 times.

Pope Francis, whom some journalists describe as the Master of metaphors, at the Chrism Mass in 2014, declared that priests are “to smell like their sheep.” Francis urges priests to live close to their people, especially the marginalized. He tells theologians that they are to do their work not in ivory towers, but
to live on the frontier, “where the gospel meets the needs of the people, to whom the gospel should be proclaimed in understandable and meaningful ways.” (100th anniversary of Theologate at Argentina.)

One line in today’s gospel strikes me as it never has before. Jesus declares, “I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice.” (v. 14) We all know many people who have no religious affiliation, for whatever reasons. The Pew Forum for Religious Research reports that among people my age, 10% claim no religious affiliation. The national average for unaffiliated peoples is 20%. Among Millennials, people born since 1980, 30% claim either to be atheistic, agnostic or unaffiliated. And probably some of them are included among our family members, our school staff and our colleagues. Years ago, when the local bishop installed me in my position as pastor in the rural parish mentioned above, he said to me, and I will never forget, “Vince, you are not just pastor of St. Joseph Parish; you are pastor of the town of Emmitsburg.” Sisters and friends, we are responsible for shepherding, caring for, praying for, protecting, helping all the people whom we encounter. What a marvelous vocation God has given us: our Christian vocation by baptism, and specific vocation by nature and grace.

“I have other sheep, who do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice.” ... What might we do to bring Jesus to these people, and to bring them to Jesus? ... Prayer is our most important activity whereby we might evangelize. Also, inspiration, whereby we touch someone’s soul in whatever ways we might do that to give them an experience of God. It could be our example, words, kindness, encouragement, fidelity to Christ and his ways?

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He has other sheep who do not [yet] belong to the fold. ... What might we do today or tomorrow to inspire people and to help to lead them to Jesus? ...