

Fourth Sunday of Easter – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – April 22, 2018
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Most of us are sufficiently familiar with American history to recall the revolution by which our nation gained its independence, the sad and violent conflicts between settlers and Native Americans, and the long American Civil War. But between 1870 and 1900, “range wars” were fought in Texas and throughout the American West. These battles, largely forgotten in our day, pitted powerful cattle ranchers against up-start sheep herders. The two were in conflict because cattle and sheep have different needs for grass and water. Cattlemen felt that their way of life was being threatened by the encroachment of sheep ranches. Those who raised sheep, by contrast, saw no reason that American freedom could not extend to the ability to raise different livestock. I don’t have to tell you who won. These days we may make several trips a month to McDonalds or Burger King or Wendy’s, but very few of us visit the local fast-food mutton chains. We wear cowboy boots and cowboy hats, but the only time our children dress as shepherds is for the Christmas play. The thirty years of conflict at the end of the nineteenth century made it clear that America was, and will likely remain, a beef culture. Shepherds need not apply.

In many ways, the victory of the cowboy over the shepherd – at least in our popular culture – has much to teach us about the American character. As a people, we value independence – and there is no figure more independent than a cowboy riding the trail alone. Cue the background harmonica music. A shepherd could never ride away alone – the sheep need his time and attention too much. America values toughness and cowboys are the toughest of the lot – cattle are branded and driven. Sheep, on the other hand, are tended and fed. They must be nurtured and protected. Cowboys can be carefree, but a shepherd must be a caregiver. A cowboy often holds his own life in his hands, but a shepherd, Jesus tells us, lays down his life for his sheep. Yes, cowboys can tell us much about what it means to be an American, but shepherds can tell us much about what it means to be a Christian.

When, in today’s gospel, we hear Jesus call himself the “Good Shepherd,” he knew what he was talking about. Shepherds were quite common in Jesus’ time – mutton and wool were very valuable commodities. But though we have made many technological advances in the last two millennia, the work of a shepherd has really changed very little. Being a shepherd is time-consuming, hard work. It has always been a profession that requires extraordinary dedication and real nurturing

skills. Sheep, it seems, are not incredibly bright, so a shepherd must do the thinking for both of them – ensuring that he leads them to food and water, that he looks out for any and all dangers. A shepherd is very much like a parent – and the Good Shepherd, Jesus, is very much like his Heavenly Father. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, feeds us with himself – in the magnificent gift of the Eucharist. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, guides and protects us, not just as children but all of our lives. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, loves us unconditionally. Indeed, he loves us enough to give up his life on the altar of the cross.

In the history of our own country, the victory of the cowboy over the shepherd meant that shepherds became cast-offs, those who were rejected. Jesus himself was the “stone rejected by the builders who became the cornerstone.” In our American desire to identify with the independence and toughness of the cowboy, have we rejected the very qualities that shepherds bring to their tasks, the very qualities that make Jesus the Good Shepherd? Yes, we are an independent people, but each of us is dependent upon and called to serve our brothers and sisters with compassion. Yes, we can be tough, but our strength must never impede us from gentleness and sensitivity toward those in need. Yes, we are invited to accept the ministry of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, his care, his love. But we are invited as well to be more than sheep, more than those lost little creatures who must be tended and fed. As Christians, we are challenged to imitate Jesus Himself. We are challenged to be shepherds for one another – to feed those who hunger, to comfort those who hurt, to bring the powerful, healing message of the gospel to every home and every heart. And we take up this calling in the same way that Jesus did – not by grasping power, but by laying it down; not by commanding the situation, but by surrendering control to God. This spirit of self-sacrifice is not one we can muster on our own. It is, rather, one that comes from being attentive to the movements of God’s Spirit in our lives, from our own prayerful conversations with the Good Shepherd, from the strength we derive when we share in the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. Jesus says that he knows his sheep and his sheep know him. From the way we live our lives, are we listening for the voice of the Good Shepherd or are we more attentive to the noises of this world? Are we seeking to follow the Good Shepherd or are we trying to ride the range alone? Ultimately, when the Good Shepherd seeks us, will he recognize us as one of his flock?