

Homily at St. John in the Wilderness
Sunday, May 11, 2025
Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7:9-17, John 10:22-30
The Rev. Patricia Tanzer Askew

“O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads.”

I remember her as a very small woman - even when I was a young child - maybe because those of us in the Tanzer family were all tall. She was not. But she always wore beautiful clothes and was, herself, quite beautiful. But that small stature and elegant beauty belied a strong and tough woman.

There was the story I heard many times of when she worked behind the cash register at Walgreens in the heart of Chicago. A man snuck out of the door right where Elsie was working, without stopping to pay for his merchandise. This diminutive woman dropped everything she was doing and chased him down the sidewalks of Chicago - finally downing him with her swinging purse. I am sure that shop lifter had looked at her and had totally misjudged how she would react to his actions.

Another story heard often was how she took a stranger into her house as a foster child. He was 13 years old and had lived all his young life in orphanages prior to that. It took great strength and courage to become a foster mother to this child, who his friends called, “Wild Bill”, but I called Dad. This courageous woman was Elsie Molitor, but to me, Grandma.

Dad lived with the Molitors for 5 years until he enlisted in the Army during WWII and then returned to their home after the war as he got a job and married my mother a few years later. But even after Dad had left the Molitor's home to make a family of his own, he always included his foster parents, who he called Mom and Dad in family activities - birthdays, Christmas celebrations, Easter egg hunts, etc. And they always came - carrying gifts for us.

When we moved from Chicago to Los Angeles, we stayed in touch with Elsie over the phone and visited every summer when we made those long, arduous cross country road trips, camping along the way. When Elsie got older and moved to a nursing home, Dad and Mom drove to Chicago frequently - Dad with his harmonica so that he could entertain Elsie and all the residents with his music. And when Elsie died, of course the Tanzers were present at her funeral to honor her.

Elsie was truly a shepherd to my father as a teenager. She nurtured him and taught him what it meant to be part of a family and how members of a loving family supported and loved one another. She provided him with a safe place to sleep and good food to eat and encouragement with his high school studies - a real home. She saw to it that he attended her church - a church where years later he would meet the love of his life, my mother. There were times I am sure Elsie had to be tough with her foster son, but we know she knew how to do that as well.

So what was it about their relationship that kept a foster mother and son together for all those years? It was love. And when Dad had a family of his own and Elsie was moving into old age, Dad, the one who was nurtured, became the one who

nurtured this wonderful foster mother. And he could do this because he had been paying attention to her all those years and learned how to be a nurturer, a shepherd.

And isn't it appropriate that today, Good Shepherd Sunday, coincides this year with Mother's Day. Because isn't being a good mother all about being a good shepherd?

But, as we know, not all shepherds are foster mothers or mothers or even fathers. All of us, old or young, have chances in our lives to step out in faith and help someone in need - not out of some obligation or so that others will see it and give us a gold star, but because our love of God and neighbor compels us to rise up in love to be a shepherd.

Can you think of some people who have shepherded you over the years? I am sure there are many. But if we are looking for someone holding a shepherd's crook with a lamb across their shoulders, we might be looking in the wrong place and miss the true shepherds in our lives. We might need to look instead at the one who brings over a casserole when we are mourning or drives us to a doctor's appointment or phones to see how we are doing. These are our shepherds and we will know them by their loving deeds.

Of course, we are all shepherded by that same good shepherd, Jesus the Christ. And we can open any gospel to read about all the ways he nurtured those he met and taught them a healthier and more loving way to live life and relate to God and their neighbors.

We see how he cared for his disciples and continually taught them and then corrected them when they misunderstood - not in anger, but so that they would get it right and could, themselves, be good shepherds when he was gone. And, we know that this good shepherd, Jesus, continues to guide, direct, teach, and love us today.

A number of years ago I attended a workshop on how to teach Sunday School using the Godly Play curriculum. It is a rather unique style of teaching children that considers the Sunday School room a Holy Place. The children are called into the room by name. The presence of Christ is recognized in the gathering each week by lighting a candle and, at the end of the class, that candle is blown out so the presence of Christ can go out into the world. The centerpiece of the class is the weekly story and it is told with wonderful props and in a style of wondering so that the children can use their own imaginations to know and learn to love God.

The story told us at the workshop, complete with props, was the story of the Good Shepherd. A gold box was opened and a large piece of green felt was removed and smoothed down on the floor. A smaller piece of blue felt was placed on top of the green as were several smaller black, irregular pieces. Then many long and slender brown pieces were stacked on each other to form an enclosure. We decided it was a large area of grass with a pond and rocks. We knew the enclosure was a sheep pen when the tiny wooden sheep (one for each of the workshop participants) came out of the gold box and were placed inside the pen.

Then the Good Shepherd came out and stood in the pen with the sheep. He opened the gate and guided them to the grass where they could eat and to the pond so they could drink. He led them through the dangerous rocks so that they would not get lost or hurt. But if they did get into some sort of trouble, he was there to help - even to the point of laying down his life for his sheep. After a day of grazing, he led them back to the safety of the sheep pen for the night, calling them each by name as they entered. And, as it turned out, their names were our names.

If you think about it, weren't we all called here today by that same Good Shepherd who knows us and calls us by name - to this sheep fold, this place of safety, and learning, and showing love to our fellow sheep. There is a holy place where we can gather to eat and drink and be nourished. And when it is time for us to go back into the world, we are told to share our experience of Christ with others and spread the good news, and so we do.

And that good news was shared many years ago to Elsie Molitor, who shared it with Bill Tanzer and both were shepherds to many people - even me. I take great comfort knowing that both of them have now journeyed on, having been called by name by the Great Shepherd, who continues to love and cherish them.

Amen.