

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B
Fr. Chad S. Green
Mary, Queen of Peace Catholic Church
Sammamish, Washington
2 May 2021

Acts 9:26-31
Psalm 22
1 John 3:18-24
(John 15:4a, 5b) John 15:1-8

*I Am the Good Shepherd; I Am the True Vine
(First Communions & Catechesis of the Good Shepherd)*

This weekend we celebrate First Communions with 52 of our parish children and their families! The children have been preparing since last fall, beginning with preparations for First Reconciliation. At their First Reconciliation liturgy in December, I told a story that I hope they still remember; one that I think many of you will recognize from my First Communion homily last summer. Do any of our First Communicants remember the story I told you last December? Who were my two little friends that I told you about?

A few years ago, I was on retreat at the Benedictine nuns' monastery on Shaw Island with two of my friends.¹ Our first day there, we walked by the fence of the sheepfold, and we met two baby sheep at the fence, and we fed them some grass. Do you remember what happened the next day? The two baby sheep saw us from across the field, and they came running to us, yelling something. Do you remember what they were yelling? "Cha-a-a-ad! Cha-a-a-ad!" And my buddies looked at me and said, "*Du-u-u-ude!* They know your name!"

I still don't know how they knew my name, but, more importantly, *why did they come running to us?* Because they remembered that we had fed them! They had felt loved and nourished by us, and they wanted to be fed again.

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Last week, we celebrated Good Shepherd Sunday.² We were reminded of Jesus' words to us: "I am the Good Shepherd."³ Maybe you've been to a farm or out in the fields and have seen sheep running to a shepherd. Or, maybe you've experienced sheep running to you—or can

at least envision those two baby sheep running to me and my buddies. With His parable of the Good Shepherd, Jesus teaches us what kind of personal relationship He wants to have with each one of us. He wants us to know that He is the One who saves our life, always looking out for us, protecting us from evil, and calling us to come running back to Him anytime that we stray.

Our First Communicants have been preparing for many months—and even since their Baptism—to be fed by Jesus, who also said to us, “I am the Bread of Life.”⁴ When we hear His voice and run back to Him, He does not reject us.⁵ He feeds us with His Body and Blood, and we will never hunger, never thirst, and never die.⁶

Our prayer today is that this will be the first of *many* Communions for our parish children. That they will get better and better at recognizing the Good Shepherd’s voice. And, that they will always run back to Him, trusting that Jesus will feed, protect, love, and nourish them throughout their life.

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Update to my story of the two baby sheep. (Or, as it’s called on social media these days: “How it started... How it’s going...”)

In January, I went back to Shaw Island for another retreat. I was looking forward to seeing those two baby sheep again, who would by now be about five years old. On Monday morning, as I was heading to Mass at the nuns’ chapel, I walked by the sheepfold. I looked out towards the sheep in the field and, guess what happened? Nothing. The sheep just kept quietly munching away on the grass.

Tuesday, I walked by the sheepfold again. Nothing. Wednesday. Again, nothing. I stopped along the fence and looked out at all the sheep and said, “Don’t you remember me? It’s Cha-a-a-ad!” Still, nothing.

But, as I was looking out at the field, I noticed that there were two sheep looking at me. All the other sheep? Heads down in the grass, munching away. But there were two sheep were staring at me. And then I remembered that these same two sheep were staring at me the previous days. All the other sheep wouldn't even look up for a moment. But these two sheep just kept staring at me.

And, I realized: these have got to be the same two sheep that I met five years ago! But, now they'd grown up. And, what can happen to any of us as we grow up? We can lose some of our childlike zeal and excitement. They recognized me, but they didn't want to embarrass themselves in front of the other sheep. They had a reputation to protect, so they were playing it cool. So, I gave them a head nod, and did the same as I walked by on Thursday and Friday.

The question for us today: *Do we sometimes do the same in our relationship with Jesus?* Are we willing to run to Jesus when we need Him? Are we willing to express our excitement, joy, zeal, and love for Jesus publicly? Or, do we play it cool? Keep things under control...

Our children come to church today with excitement, joy, reverence—and seeing them evokes those feelings in all of us. And then we're reminded of Jesus' words to us: "...unless you...become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."⁷ *Can we recapture that childlike and sheep-like zeal in our relationship with Jesus?*

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Whereas last week's Gospel gave us the image of the Good Shepherd, this week's Gospel continues the theme of the essentiality of our personal relationship with Jesus with the Parable of the Vine and the Branches. Just as a sheep is lost and vulnerable without the Good Shepherd, so, too is a branch useless and dead without the vine.

What's going to eventually happen to a sheep if it's lost in the wilderness on its own? Some predator is going to get it. What's going to eventually happen to a branch plucked from the vine? It can do nothing. There's no life in it. It cannot fulfill its purpose of bearing fruit. It's very soon going to wither and die.⁸

My friends, this is the message of the parables the past two Sundays. Jesus desires a personal relationship with each one of us. And, this personal relationship is the most vital relationship we have. No other relationship matters, if we don't have this one.

If we don't learn how to recognize Jesus' voice—or decide to ignore Jesus' voice—then we become vulnerable to being led astray by other voices, which are only intent on destroying us.⁹ If we become so grown up, independent, and self-sufficient that we think we don't need to run to Jesus anymore, well, then we'll become like a disconnected branch with no life force, no chance of bearing fruit.

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The timing of last week's Gospel and this week's Gospel are providential in our celebration of First Communion and our understanding of relationship to Jesus, but they are also providential in the timing of an announcement regarding our children's faith formation program. A recap of where we currently are: After many years of forming children here at MQP and other parishes in the Archdiocese, Jennie Caldwell retired at the end of December. Marissa Schulz, along with the support of Ana Maria Niño, continued the program through the early part of 2021. I'm grateful to Jennie, Marissa, Ana Maria, and all the volunteer catechists who have helped prepare our children for this weekend.

Marissa's role the past few months of focusing on children has been temporary, as her position on the staff moving forward will be working on the overall coordination of our faith

formation and catechesis programs for all ages. We are now ready to seek a new Pastoral Assistant for Children's Faith Formation. Specifically, we have discerned that this position that's being advertised will be seeking candidates who are certified in a method of faith formation called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, also known by its initials, CGS. Our goal is to hire someone for this role as soon as possible, and begin faith formation in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd model by this fall.

What is CGS? CGS is a faith formation method for children ages 3 to 12, developed in the 1950's by two Catholic women in Italy. The method follows Montessori educational principles, and is based on the Bible, Catholic liturgy and sacraments, Tradition, and Church teachings.¹⁰ The methods have continued to be developed and spread throughout the world, including to, as of now, at least sixteen Catholic parishes in the Archdiocese of Seattle.

I first learned about CGS fourteen years ago from my formation director in seminary. She was someone whom I and my seminary classmates admired and respected for her brilliance as a theologian and professor, but even more for her faithfulness and prayerfulness. So, when she first told me about CGS, I listened to what she had to say. Since that time, I've observed it, learned about it, heard from parents about it, and then got to experience it as a priest during my two years at Holy Family in Kirkland.

One of the things that I love about CGS, is that I've seen how it helps children develop a personal relationship with Jesus. I said that last week's and this week's Gospels were providential in their timing because these two parables are the foundational themes for CGS and are included in their logo. Simply put, the goal of CGS is to help children recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, and then help them remain connected to Him, the true vine, and bear much fruit throughout their life.

CGS is not the only way to form children in the faith, but I am convinced that it is one of the best ways, and I believe that now is the right time for us to launch it at MQP. But, we'll need everyone's help to begin something this ambitious and this beautiful.

First, we'll need everyone's prayers that Jesus will send the right candidates to apply for this position. Second, once the right candidate arrives, we'll need many people to help with launching the program: as volunteer catechists, as those who help build furniture, as those who work with wood and fabrics to create the learning materials for the children. More details will come about all those things this summer, so please start praying about it now.

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One of the beautiful things about CGS is that it can involve the whole parish in forming our children, and, through helping our children develop their personal relationship with Jesus, we adults become more childlike. And we all get better at hearing the Good Shepherd's voice, remaining in Him, and developing and strengthening our own personal relationship with Jesus, as well.

¹ Our Lady of the Rock Benedictine Monastery, Shaw Island, Wash. (<https://olrmonastery.org/>)

² The Fourth Sunday of Easter is known as "Good Shepherd Sunday", because the Gospel in each of the three years comes from John Chapter 10, Jesus' description of Himself as the Good Shepherd. (Year A: 10:1-10; Year B: 10:11-18; Year C: 10:27-30)

³ John 10:11, 14

⁴ John 6:35, 48

⁵ John 6:37

⁶ John 6:35, 48-58

⁷ Matthew 18:3

⁸ John 15:5-6

⁹ John 10:10

¹⁰ <https://www.cgsusa.org/discover/faq/>