

4th Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2020

When I was a pre-school toddler, my *mother* was the primary caregiver. She was able to stay at home with her children. My older brother and sister were already in school by then, So I enjoyed a lot of my mother's undivided attention. Though I can't say for certain she always enjoyed *mine*! I remember going out on one of our regular *adventures* to *K-Mart*, When it was still on top of the hill over 19th Street as you left Watervliet. I was *supposed* to stay by my mother as she did her shopping for household necessities. By the only thing *I* considered a necessity, was making an exotic *play-land* of the *toy aisle*! So, I took my eyes off mom for who-knows-how long! And when I cried out for her, I couldn't hear her voice. I *fast* lost interest in the toys, Wandering in great anxiety among the aisles and the clothing fixtures, in search for my mother. But I was *lost*. And in *terrible* distress. I grew weak and *paralyzed* in my fear and disorientation, and just stood there, crying. But *then*, she must've heard my crying, because I could hear her call out to me by name. It grew louder and stronger, and I could easily *recognize* her voice. The strange territory and all the dangers that this *K-mart* became to me simply faded away. I was given a new *focus* and *purpose* in my life in that tiny moment of being lost:

To follow the voice of my mother, my whole *life*.

My friends, whose voice do *we* follow when we are lost? Today we hear from Jesus that He is the good shepherd who knows his sheep by name. And when he calls to them, they *know* Him, and they *follow* Him. In today's society, we're all supposed to be *independent*. And if someone accuses us of being like *sheep*, it's *not* a compliment! We're seen as simple and docile, subjecting ourselves to the power of another. First of all, let's not *fool* ourselves, we *all* choose one thing or another to have power over us. We can give in to our base passions, and give power over to our temptations, much like *I* did in that toy aisle.

What are the toys in our lives that tempt us? That take us off the course to *true* happiness? Is it a desire to control everything around us -- how *exhausting* and isolating! Is it a slavish response to pleasures in food or drink or physical gratification? Is it a false sense of security by hiding in a bottle or a pill or an *iPhone*? Or is it a warped *view* of ourselves, As being only as good as the amount of money in our paychecks, Or the number of people we please even if they have no real loyalty to us? If we define our happiness by our toys, then we'll *never* have enough to feel satisfied. And if we treat *people* like possessions, then we'll *never* know the true freedom and joy of loving relationships -- The sense of *gratitude* and *peace* and *purpose* they give us.

My friends, the *best* thing we can allow to have power over us is *true love*. And I'm not talkin about romance here! But even *there* -- if the love is true, there is a joy and sense of being complete and satisfied and at *peace* -- Even when we must make *sacrifices* to *nurture* that love.

As surely as a baby needs its milk, the human heart needs to be fed. And if it knows true love --

Selfless love -- *faithful* love -- A love that exudes *joy* when it must *suffer* for the good of the beloved, then that heart will have its fill! *Think* about who you love -- *really* love -- in this way.

If it's true, then you *know* without hesitation -- And with *complete* commitment, That bearing a sacrifice or struggle -- Giving up even the *best* of our stupid toys -- And even embracing *suffering* and the risk of death *itself* -- Becomes the simple and *obvious* choice; A choice we make *happily*, Rather than live *without* our true love and *their* well-being ahead of our own.

Well, *that* is the kind of love Israel has come to know in their God -- *our* God. One who cares for us and puts up with our straying; Who rescues us and provides for our best interests.

This image of God as our shepherd is the *template* Israel demanded their *kings* follow. But we have something *better* than a template. We have Jesus Christ as our King! *The Good Shepherd*.

The face of God's amazing and persevering love. He wants to be so close to us, He *comes* into the frailty of human flesh, And He even sacrifices His *life* for us, so that we may enjoy true happiness -- true love -- true *life*.

My friends, there is *no* true happiness, true love, or true life, Without *Christ*. As He said, *He* is the gate to safety and contentment. *He* is the *way* to true life -- a life with our God. We're at the beginning of May -- *Mary's* month. In *all* of the Bible, Mary only speaks four times. *Three* of them are in Luke's narrative about the birth of Christ. But in *John's* Gospel -- the Gospel that tells us to follow the Good Shepherd -- Mary only speaks *once*. She's at the Wedding at Cana.

And her 33-year-old son and his buddies are invited too, before they began His mission. She basically spurs Jesus into action at that wedding, When the couple ran out of wine for their guests. She simply says to Jesus: "They have no wine." He basically says to her, '*C'mon Mom!* I'm not ready to start this whole preaching and miracle thing! It's gonna wind up taking a lot out of me!' Mary doesn't argue or cajole or so much as blink an eye! She simply turned to the caterers and said: "Do whatever He tells you." What a strong *faith*! She *trusted* that Jesus, the Son of God, would set His life's purpose into action that day: To love all of *us* -- even to *death*.

He changed water into wine in Cana that day. The *water* is the water of our *baptism* -- We *die* to old selfish ways and our pathetic slavery to our toys. And we're *reborn* into the life of *God*. The *wine* points to the *gift* of Jesus' *blood* that *feeds* and *heals* us -- And gives us the *strength* to follow the way of Christ. We embark on our journey into eternal life, *Following* Christ. *Listening* to Him. And, as Mary said, *doing* whatever He tells us. If we do that, the wine will taste sweeter than any of those cheap substitutes -- And the wine will *never* run out. But *like* Christ, that means *embracing* true love -- A love that can lead to the *Cross* -- To suffering and heartache and sacrifice. But if we *truly* love, there's no way on *Earth*, that we wouldn't *happily* bear suffering and sacrifice -- and *death itself* -- For those we love. So, *whose* voice are *we* going to follow

today? Though we stray, who will *always* be seeking us out, calling out to us by *name*, so we may have life and have it more abundantly? Just as a *fetus in the womb* can distinguish its mother's voice, we *know* our Shepherd is Jesus. So, may we fast lose interest in all those distracting toys, *And Listen* for His voice. *He* will give our lives their focus and purpose and peace. *Do* whatever He tells you and me. There *is* no other way to complete joy and satisfaction of life. Jesus *Christ -- crucified and risen -- is the Way, the Truth... and the Life!*