

There's a sweet story<sup>i</sup> of a mother in India who went looking for help, concerned about her young son's addiction to eating an obscene amount of sugar. They began a long journey walking many miles under the scorching sun to go see Mahatma Gandhi. When they arrived, the mother pleaded with Gandhi to please talk to her son and help him to understand that eating too much sugar was not healthy and that he needed to stop.

Gandhi replied to the desperate Mother "I cannot tell him that," but invited her to return in a few weeks and said he would talk to him then. Confused and upset, the mother and her son returned home.

Two weeks later they made the long journey back again. Gandhi greeted them and said to the boy "You should stop eating sugar. It's not good for your health." The boy nodded his head and promised he would stop.

The Mother, pleasantly surprised and justifiably confused, asked "Why didn't you tell him that two weeks ago when I brought him to see you the first time?!"

Gandhi smiled and said, "two weeks ago I was eating a lot of sugar myself."

On this 4th Sunday of Easter we take a dramatic shift from

celebrating Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who was crucified and resurrected

to Jesus as the Good Shepherd who guides his sheep who know his voice, to springs of water, and wipes away every tear from their eyes.

Saint Irenaeus, the 2nd century bishop of Lyon, describes it this way "Jesus became what we are so that we might become what He is."

A Shepherd who becomes a sheep is like an episode of the show Undercover Boss, except Jesus isn't spying on us. He came to show us how to live and to restore our relationship with our creator.

The life of a Shepherd was not an easy or even a well-respected life. Our images of shepherds cradling cute, cuddly, fluffy white sheep are way off. Shepherds, in Jesus' day, were considered so unclean they weren't allowed to worship in the Temple. Their jobs were difficult and dangerous. They were the 'migrant workers' of our day.

Being a sheep isn't much better. Sheep don't get regular baths, they're always wondering off, and always in danger of becoming someone's meal.

Jesus using the analogy of shepherd and sheep makes a lot of sense in biblical times, but I wonder what analogy you might use to describe your relationship with God today?

You've probably heard people use the analogy that Jesus is their co-pilot...though I often wonder if Jesus is in the driver's seat, passenger seat, or back seat.

Maybe you think (consciously or unconsciously) of God like a boss, or CEO who you are constantly trying to impress in hopes of getting a promotion.

Some imagine God as their favorite grandfather who has an inheritance waiting for them.

Some seem to treat God like their GPS who gives directions but is often heard saying, "rerouting...make a U-turn at the next light."

How about a distant Uncle who occasionally sends a birthday card with some cash in it?

Maybe you think of Jesus as your BFF...who knows everything about you, and you can always talk to.

Maybe God is like a parent: a firm father reminding you of the consequences of your actions or a loving and nurturing Mother, or a mixture of both.

The Shepherd analogy found in the familiar 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm portrays a God who is present, protective, providing for every need, and promoting peace.

Years ago, when I was in seminary at Sewanee, I took my kids shopping at a favorite used bookstore housed in a giant warehouse. On this particular day, when it was time to leave, Victoria, who was 6 or 7 years old at the time, boldly set out a few steps ahead of me, as we made our way to the exit. Confused by the grandeur of the store, she confidently took a left turn where we needed to take a right so I stopped and watched, and waited for her to realize that we weren't going that way. The gap between us widened with each step she took. When she finally realized she didn't know where she was she stopped to look around. I watched her facial expression quickly turn from carefree...to surprise...then to concern as she became aware that we were not right behind her. I watched as her eyes searched out for me, each second generating more fear across her face. When she finally spotted me still standing a few yards behind her, she ran back and announced "Mom! I was lost!"

I assured her that even though she felt lost, I had been watching her the entire time. And then, I reminded her about how important it is to stay close and not get too far ahead of us, especially when she doesn't know where we are going.

Our relationship with God, is often like this. We are prone to go ahead thinking we know the way, wander off, or get lost.

Ironically it is our sense of security, knowing the Shepherd cares for us so deeply that can get us into trouble sometimes. It is that sense of security, knowing that God's love is unconditional and God's mercy is everlasting that allows us to run up ahead or wander off, testing the boundaries and gaining our independence and freedom. That freedom is both a blessing and a burden.

In this freedom our fears of separation and suffering are lessened by the knowledge that nothing can ever separate us from God (Romans 8).

It is through testing this freedom and experiencing the Good Shepherd seeking us out like Jesus does with his disciples after the resurrection, finding us when we get lost, welcoming us back when we wander off, and saving us when we are in danger, that reminds us time after time to abide in his love and stay close.

I hope this week you'll think about your relationship with God and how you might characterize it. Whatever analogy you use to describe your relationship with God, I hope that it describes a God who pursues you, who provides for you, who protects you, who loves you, and knows you.

If you've wandered off or feel separated, I hope you'll take some time to be silent and listen to hear God's voice calling you by name, inviting you to rest, to be renewed, to find peace in his abiding love and care.