

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter - John 10:11-18

A man comes upon a shepherd guarding his flock and proposes a wager: "I will bet you \$100, against one of your sheep, that I can tell you the exact number in this flock," the man says. The shepherd accepts. "973," says the man. The shepherd, astonished at the accuracy, says "I'm a man of my word; take the sheep you have won." The man picks a sheep and begins to walk away. "Wait," cries the shepherd, "Let me have a chance to get even. Double or nothing that I can guess your exact occupation." "Sure," replies the man. "You work for the Tax Bureau," says the shepherd. "Amazing!" responds the man, "How did you deduce that?" "Well," says the shepherd, "if you will first put down *my dog*, I will tell you."

There is an ancient legend told in the mountains of the Andes, about two mountain tribes. One lived at the foot of the mountains in the lowlands and the other lived at the mountain's top. These two tribes were enemies and constantly at war with one another.

One day the tribe from the top of the mountain came down to attack the lowlander's village. In the course of their plunder they kidnapped a young boy and took him with them back up the mountain.

The lowlanders immediately responded by selecting fifty of their strongest and most capable warriors and sending them on a mission to rescue the boy. The problem was that the lowlanders did not know how to climb mountains.

They did not know the paths that should be used. So, these fifty soldiers tried path after path and climbing method after climbing method. All to no avail. After three or four days of futile efforts, hopeless and helpless, they decided to give up and return to their village.

But as they were packing their gear, they looked up and they saw the mother of the child who had been kidnapped coming down from the mountain that they were unable to climb. She had her son strapped to her back. One of the soldiers went up to greet her and said, “You succeeded where fifty of the most capable people of our village, failed. How is this possible?” The woman shrugged and said, “He was not your child.”

Whenever we give life to anyone, we can do things that others cannot do and that others cannot understand. Whenever we give life to another person, we are connected to that person forever.

For the giving of life forms a bond that time does not break. Mothers know this because, in the most fundamental sense, they give life to another.

But every one of us here who is connected to anyone knows this as well, because if we are connected deeply to anyone, that connection came about because life was given.

Life can be given in an **unequal way**, like the life that parents give to children or the life teachers give to students.

Or life can be given in a **mutual manner** like the way that spouses give life to one another or the way that close friends share life together and deepen their experience of living.

But however it is done, whenever life is given, connections are formed and those connections are essential for us. Because when life is given and connections are formed, two things invariably emerge: **worth** and **sacrifice**.

It is only when we give life to one another that we really understand our own worth. It is in the process of being connected to others that we see who we are and what our true value is.

The person who lives in isolation does not even know who she or he is. But when we are connected, our life has meaning. A life without connections is empty and purposeless.

So, the connections we have to others allow us to claim our own worth. They also lead us to sacrifice. If we are connected to others, we feel their pain.

When others to whom we are connected make bad decisions or are in danger, we suffer with them. This is why mothers worry and why friends mourn. Because once we begin to love someone, it is only a matter of time before we suffer with them.

Both worth and sacrifice flow from the connections that support us, the connections that come from life that is shared. This is nothing new. It is our experience. It is simply the way things are.

But the good news found in the gospel we have just heard is this: this giving of life that leads to a connection out of which worth and sacrifice flow, is not limited simply to us.

It also applies to God. God is the one who gave us life and so God is bound to us by bonds that cannot be broken. Just as the Good Shepherd cares for the sheep and is willing to lay down his life for the sheep; God cares for us and is willing to do all that is necessary to help us.

Because of this, we should never doubt our value in God's eyes. Because of this we should never think that God has forgotten us, no matter how difficult our life becomes. God has given life to us and like a mother, can never stop caring for us, can never fail to save us.

We can doubt our own value but we should never doubt that God cares for us. Others can look at us and see us as expendable or worthless. They can point to us and ask God, "How could you love these people? They are so selfish, so judgmental, so wounded.

How could you care for them? How could you be willing to lay down your life for them?"

But to that question, God would simply shrug and say, "They are not your children." AMEN.