Fourth Sunday of Easter, Cycle B

A few weeks ago I publicly exposed

What is sometimes called the “cringe factor”

That arises within preachers

When confronted with an overused gospel image

That they have to preach one more time.

That Sunday we were graced or confronted

With the most famous account

Of finger poking, and side jabbing

in all of sacred literature – Thomas the doubter

Today we have

one of the most beloved, overused or misused images

In all of the bible.

One pointed illustration of the distress

That this too often sacchrinized image evokes

Comes from a Pastor who recalls a story of his 4 yo daughter

was deep into what he called a “daddy is doo-doo” phase

his wife’s presence was infinitely preferable to his.[[1]](#footnote-1)

*“[My daughter] called for her mother from her own bed. My wife was in the shower and unable to answer, and the tone of my daughter’s voice quickly escalated from polite request to imperious demand. Even today, when I think of my now nineteen year-old daughter, I hear Helena, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, saying, “though she be but little, she is fierce.”*

*I stepped to the threshold of her room and peeked in to reassure myself that she wasn’t in distress; that was too much for her. She sat bolt upright from her pillow, glared at me … and bellowed, “Not you again!”*

*Pastor Volck continues, “I thought of that morning as I read this week’s readings and said, [though] less emphatically than my daughter, “’Not sheep again!’”*

Another Preacher’s lament is less humorous and more pointed

He writes:

*I'll confess at the start: when I Googled the lectionary readings for this week, and realized I'd have to write [a homily] about The Good Shepherd, I cringed, turned off my computer, and went for a walk.*

*If you grew up in [my] Church, you might carry shepherd baggage, too.  Was Psalm 23 the first Psalm you memorized as a child?  Did you spend umpteen hours in Sunday School, making sheep out of toothpicks, cotton balls, and Elmer's glue?  … Did you spend any time … staring hungrily at a painting of Jesus wearing flowing robes, an adorable lamb perched on his shoulders, and wonder why God never sweeps down from the heavens to cuddle you?*

He concludes:

*I did grow up visiting my grandparents' farms in India, but I never saw my grandfather drape baby animals over his clean, robed shoulders.  Most of the time, the animals on his farm stank.  Often, at the end of a long day in their midst, so did he.  How the Church has gone from the mud-stained hardships of animal husbandry to a manicured Jesus cuddling a lily-white lamb, is beyond me.*

Many years ago celebrated Chicago biblical scholar, Dominic Crossan

Wrote a small work on various types of storytelling

He argued that the opposite ways of telling stories

Are myths - and parables

Myths communicate that all conflicts can be resolved

All disparities eliminated

one of most famous myths in the West: beauty and the beast

tale of unimaginable divergence between main protagonists

beast and human,

man and woman

rich and poor

brutal and gentle

powerful and weak

ugly and beautiful

at the end of story all differences are reconciled

everyone lives happily ever after

and a Disney franchise is born

Parables are an opposite kind of story telling

They teach that conflict can be resolved

but they suggest that it won’t happen the way you planned

you built a nice house,

but, the parable whispers, too bad it is on sand

it is clear that you will be first

but, the parable whispers, to achieve that,

get to the end of the line

and oh yes, you are invited into life ever lasting

but only, the parables whisper, if you are ready to die

Crossan argues that both types of stories exist in the NT

Because spiritually we need them both as Christians

The ultimate myth/parable combination

Being crucifixion and resurrection

Yet Crossan argues there is a predominance of parables

And Jesus was intentional

About societal and religious reversals

Reimaginings

Even revolutions

In service of the reign of God as he understood it

Part of the cringe factor from multiple preachers, including me

Is that we have eliminated the parabolic

From the Good Shepherd metaphor

And without this balance

It has migrated from the mythic to the sentimental

While many contemporary images of the Good shepherd

Seem the biblical equivalent

To “Dances with Sheep”

Kevin Costner’s got it right

For Jesus didn’t dance with Sheep,

but was a god-man who “dances with wolves.”

Thus there is that sobering gospel line

About this good shepherd

Probably better translated as “noble shepherd”  
 who lays down his life for the sheep

A contemporary example is Polish Franciscan Maximillian Kolbe

He didn’t frolic in the fields with his sheep

But went to the death camp at Auschwitz

After 10 men escaped from that camp in 1941

The camp leaders decided to pick 10 men

To be starved to death

To deter further escape attempts

One of the men chosen to die cried out

“my wife .. my children”

Kolbe volunteered to take his place

Not exactly a mythic tale, but on the other hand,

maybe so parabolic, it seems out of our reach

for how many of us

would be capable of such nobility?

Some daylight appears for me in response to that question

Through the biblical work of a favorite blogger

Who suggests that the Greek word behind the phrase

“lays down his **life** for the sheep”

Is the word *psuchein* … or psyche

What happens, he suggest

In this era of hyperbolic posturing

Of unending social and political preening

Of Interminable Jousting and grandstanding

when we begin to practice laying down our psyche

And making way for the other

Those outside our flock,

our tribe, our race, our gender

in the spirit of a Jesus

who is explicit in his openness and care

for those who did not belong to his tribe, race or fold

We often learn to lay down our psyche

Our pretentiousness

Our protectionism

Our privilege …

When we, like Jesus, come face to face with our brokenness

Theologian Ron Rolheiser tells the story

Of a woman raised in a religious home

a regular church-goer until her university years

when her interest in religion progressively waned

several years after having given up church,

she spend some time with a married sister

who lived near a ski resort.

She arrived on a Saturday evening

the next morning, her sister invited her to go to church

She went skiing instead, hit a tree, broke her leg

Recuperating at her sister’s

The next Sunday the sister asked again about church

Since skiing was not an option, she went

The gospel as about the Good Shepherd

The preacher was a visiting-priest from Israel

He could not see her, complete with cast,

sitting in the back pews

He began his homily by saying

*There's a practice among shepherds in Israel … that existed at the time of Jesus and is still in use today. Sometimes very early on in the life of a lamb, if a shepherd senses that this particular lamb is going to be a congenital stray and forever be drifting away from the herd, he deliberately breaks its leg so that he has to carry it until its leg is healed. By that time, the lamb becomes so attached to the shepherd that it never strays again!*

*“I may be dense,” shared the woman, “but, given my broken leg and all that chance coincidence, hearing those words woke up something inside me. I have prayed and gone to church regularly ever since!”*

I am not exactly sure that former FBI director James Comey

Could accurately be described as a sheep

Or his previous boss a noble shepherd

But analogously it is an interesting mind game

To consider what happens

When shepherd wants to break the sheep’s leg for other reasons

Wants the sheep to serve

The sheep to suffer

The sheep to die

The title of Comey’s memoire, *A Higher Loyalty*

Raises an interesting question

About where our loyalties really lie

Is it in some person, office, institution or state?

There is some evidence that Comey is a student of the writings

Great 20th century ethicist and public theologian

Reinhold Niebuhr

One gets the impression that Comey is channeling Niebuhr

at least some thinking behind Niebuhr’s influential book

*Moral Man and Immoral Society*

But Niebuhr was not just a social or political critic

Who believed that one moral many

Or one spiritual boy scout

Could stand up in the face of immorality

In one of his more telling sermons, he proclaimed

*Because we are both small and great, we have discerned a mystery and a meaning beyond our smallness and our greatness, and a justice and a love which completes our incompletion, which corrects our judgments, and which brings the whole story to a fulfillment beyond our power to fulfill any story.*

The decidedly untrue story is told of the modern day shepherd tending his sheep one day along a stretch of deserted road when a Porsche came speeding up, and screeched to a halt. A well-dressed young man exited the car, approached the shepherd and asked: “If I can tell you how many sheep you have, will you give me one?**”** The shepherd said, “Sure.**”** The young man went back to his car, opened up his laptop, connected to the internet, scanned the ground using his GPS, opened a database filled with logarithms and complicated equations, printed out a 100-page report on his stylish new mini-printer, turned to the shepherd and said, “You have exactly 1,586 sheep.**”** The surprised shepherd said, “That’s right. I guess you can have your sheep.**”** The man picked up an animal and put it in his car.

As he was about to drive away, the shepherd said, “Hold on a minute. If I can guess what line of work you’re in, can I have my animal back? **”** The man answered, “Sure.**”** The shepherd said, “You’re a government bureaucrat **”** The young man replied, “Right! How did you know? **”** The shepherd said, “Easy. First, you showed up without being asked. Second, you charged me a fee to tell me something I already knew. And third, you don’t understand a thing about my business. That’s my dog you just put in your car!”

**Music**

Jesus seems to understand that governments,

Organizations, even churches

Don’t always follow a higher loyalty

Or allow for a love that corrects our judgment

We can’t even regularly recognize fellow sheep

a congenital problem for the baptized

Which makes it virtually impossible for us

To emulate nobility

And fulfill our vocation articulated in the 2nd reading

To be called children of God

Let us pray in the unfolding of this eucharist

That individually and collectively

We can lay down our psyches …

Our self-serving agendas

And embrace *a justice and a love which completes our incompletion, which corrects our judgments, and which brings the whole story to a fulfillment beyond our power to fulfill any story.* Through Christ our Lord.

1. [Brian Volck](http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/author/bvolck/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)