

In his book *The One and Only You*, Writer Bruce Larson shares a hilarious letter from a friend who had to deliver seven new-born sheep while her husband was out of town. "Never again," goes the letter, "can I think of the Good Shepherd without knowing that he must love us beyond measure if we are like sheep to him. A sheep is smelly, with an oily kind of dirt that lingers on anything it touches and soaks right through clothing to give an overall aroma long after you've come in. One old ewe that I hate with a passion, since she takes advantage of every unsuspecting moment to assert her authority, had trouble having her lamb. Would you believe we had to pen her up all the while she was trying to incapacitate us And then rassel (sic) her down and sit on her head before we could pull the lamb? Then she was so exhausted she didn't want to get up to take care of her baby, so I pretended to get back into the pen with her and she was so anxious to clobber me, she got up with no trouble at all. And that was only one of seven we delivered that week." (quoted in "Dynamic Preaching, XXV, 2, pp. 36-37)

You can understand shepherds putting themselves out for sheep because they're the family livelihood. But laying down your total absolute one-time-around life? That's not livelihood. It's great great stupidity. Or it's great great love.

It's not stupidity, because Jesus is the very wisdom of God. It's love, because it's freely chosen. Jesus is not the paratrooper who was asked how many times he jumped out of the plane. "Never," he replied. "I was pushed, several times" (Ibid.) Jesus heard God's voice. He saw the cross. He saw you. And emphatically unreservedly freely, he jumped.

I hope we do that ... we who are baptized into his body and are now genetically engineered to be shepherds. I hope we can shepherd moms, dads and catechists, shepherd St. Vincent and Dorothy's helpers, church ministers, office greeters ... who hear God's voice, see God's sheep ... and jump.

Today is a world day of prayer for vocations to the priesthood and religious life. When you're loved like a shepherd by some priest or religious, like a Fr. Farrell, Fr. Wong, Sr. Gabriela, Sr. Lydia, Br. Grady, Fr. Deegan, Fr. Rudy, Msgr. Early, Msgr. Neary, Fr. Duggan ..., you never forget. It follows you the rest of your life.

I'll close by saying something about me. I'm a shepherd priest because I fell in love with God. I was a grade school boy when it happened. How it happened was through some of the most precious experiences of my life. I didn't fall in love with the sheep, and then fall in love with God. I fell in love with God, and with Mass and lots of other things connected with them ... and then God pointed me to the sheep ... right up to today and to you ... and said JUMP..

There are some young people in our parish, I'm glad to say, considering life as a priest or nun. I can tell you a more deeply satisfying life is not imaginable to me.

Jesus says: I am the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep. This command I have received from my Father. This is why the Father loves me. Happy Good Shepherd Sunday! May God give us shepherds ... and make us shepherds!