

**EASTER 4B – April 22, 2018**  
***Remember Me To Your Children***  
**(Psalm 23; 1 John 3:16-24; John 10:11-18)**

I first met him on the outdoor basketball courts at Laura Donovan Elementary School when I was in junior high school. Guys from all over the Woodgate and Stonehurst subdivisions would gather there after school for pick-up games. Now most of these guys I'd seen around, but every once in a while there would be a new face. Well *his* was one of those new faces. And the reason *why* I didn't know him, I found out later, was that he went to St. Rose, the Roman Catholic parochial school in town.

Boys being boys, of course, no one ever bothered with formal introductions, however. We just shot around until there were enough of us for two teams, and then quickly chose up sides. When he got picked for the other team, I heard someone call him "Gunner" and thought to myself, "That's a pretty odd name." But then, when the game started, I immediately concluded that "Gunner" must surely have been a nickname.

Now, to my point, we had all sorts of nicknames back then, most of which I can't repeat for you in this setting. But *some* I can. For instance, Dave Costeira was "Moose" because the first day he showed up after transferring into our school, when one of the kids saw his big, hulking frame lumbering down the hall towards us commented, "Wow, that kid's as big as a *moose*! Or because Chuck McCann and Chris Wright always hung out together and appeared virtually inseparable, they were always known thereafter as "Batman and Robin." And because I had a bad habit of dozing off in class after lunch; in some circles, *I* was known as "Sleepy."

Well, in the basketball slang or lingo of that era, a (quote, unquote) "gunner" was someone who liked to shoot the ball, maybe a little bit *too* much. And if anyone ever fit such a nickname, it was *this*

kid. Short and kind of scrawny, he never saw a shot he didn't like. In fact, it soon became apparent that, whenever and wherever he touched the ball – regardless of the game situation or where he was positioned on the court – he was gonna shoot it. It didn't matter if he was covered or not, or even if he was double or triple teamed. It didn't matter if his other teammates were open or not, even *wide open*. If “Gunner” touched the ball, he was going to find a way to get a shot off.

In fact, throughout the game all I kept hearing was, “Gunner, over here! Gunner, don't shoot, I'm open! Hit the open man, Gunner! Pass the ball, Gunner! Gunner, pass the – *blanking* – ball! (You can fill in the expletive of your choice. And whatever one you think of, I can guarantee you it was probably used that afternoon!)”

Walking home afterwards with a couple of friends, I commented, “Boy that new kid, Gunner, sure liked to shoot. What a perfect nickname.” Someone said, “That's not his nickname... although you're right-on about his liking to shoot. No, Gunnar is his *real* name. His old man named him for someone he used to know.”

Intrigued, I decided to look into it after dinner that night, and sure enough, Gunnar, I found out, was actually a real name. Not G-U-N-N-E-R as I had first supposed, but rather G-U-N-N-A-R. I further discovered that it was a Scandinavian name, which seemed kind of strange to me since his last name was “Mariano” and he was obviously Italian.

But this other kid was right. It turns out that Gunnar *was* in fact named for someone his father once knew. Although it was several years before I heard the *whole* story...

You see, it goes back to the Korean War. Now I don't know it for a fact, but I've always wondered if it happened at that moment when the massive army of Communist China suddenly entered the

war on the side of the North Koreans, surging across the border and promptly forcing the Americans to retreat from North Korean territory. I also picture it as taking place at night, even though I don't know *this* for a fact, either.

Anyway, Mr. Mariano, Gunnar's dad, was in a platoon of Marines retreating from the enemy, and they soon found themselves trapped on the banks of a river. In other words, they were caught between the proverbial "rock and a hard place." They were too few in number, and didn't have enough fire power, to fend off the attack of a superior enemy force. So it was painfully obvious that, in just a matter of moments, they were going to be overrun and wiped out.

On the other hand, even though the river was shallow enough for them to cross at this spot, there just wasn't enough time to do it safely before the North Koreans, or the Chinese (whoever it was), caught up with them. The enemy soldiers were close on their heels and, once these enemy soldiers reached the riverbank, they would have had an easy time picking off the Americans, one by one, if the Americans tried to ford the river.

So, in the few brief seconds they had before the enemy caught up with them, Mr. Mariano's lieutenant – the officer in charge – made a fateful decision. The only way out, he quickly told his men, was if *he* stayed behind to provide covering fire in order to keep the enemy soldiers at bay while *they* crossed to safety. Then, once they were on the other side, he said, they could return the favor while he tried to cross.

The men immediately began to balk at the plan, however. They knew full well that, even if their lieutenant somehow managed to hold off the enemy while *they* crossed the river, there would never be enough time, nor could they provide sufficient covering fire from the opposite riverbank, to get *him* across... Suddenly it dawned on them... He was willing to sacrifice his *own* life in

order to *save* theirs. So they initially refused to let him do it. They vowed to *stay with him* to the bitter end, if need be. But then he played his trump card. As their commanding officer, he *ordered* them to cross the river. Only then, and with great sadness and reluctance, did they leave him behind on that riverbank and began to cross.

But before they did, however, he had a parting request... He obviously knew, just as they did, that he was probably not going to be rejoining them on the other side; that this, in fact, was going to be their *last* good-bye. So, in this final, poignant moment, he asked one thing of them, “Remember me to your children,” he said...

And, as I understand it, when Mr. Mariano and the others then waded across the river, utterly defenseless – their backs likely turned to the enemy, and their weapons held high over their heads in order to keep them dry – they could hear their lieutenant’s gunfire as he furiously occupied the oncoming enemy soldiers.

But by the time they were safely across, and had immediately turned around now to provide covering fire for their lieutenant, it had ended. There was only an eerie, deathly silence. And they immediately understood that their worst fear had been realized. Their lieutenant, their friend, was dead. He had traded *his* life for theirs.

Now I don’t know how those other men chose to remember this tremendous act of courage to *their* children. But, at first, Mr. Mariano never even told his wife about what had happened back there in Korea. For a time, several years actually, he chose to keep it to himself; to keep it a secret in his heart. Yet, when Mrs. Mariano became pregnant, a few years later, with their first child, Mr. Mariano quietly informed her that, if it was a son, he would like to name him. And then he finally told her the story. If their

child was a boy, said Mr. Mariano, his name would be *Gunnar* (or Gunner as we pronounced it); the name of that brave lieutenant back in Korea who had willingly *died* so that his men might *live*...

It occurs to me that this is a rather fitting story for this morning, which has traditionally been called “Good Shepherd” Sunday. Now I know next to nothing about shepherds or sheep, and perhaps you don’t either. But you really *don’t* have to know very much about them in order to understand the metaphor.

Literally, of course, shepherds are herdsmen; that is, those who raise and care for a flock of sheep. *Metaphorically*, however, the word can be used to denote a manager; a director; an overseer; and, in the ancient world especially, a king or ruler as well. It can also refer to a “presiding officer.” So, in a very real sense, then, we could say that that brave lieutenant Tom Mariano served under in Korea was a “shepherd” to his men.

In other words, simply speaking, a shepherd – both literally as well as metaphorically – is a *leader*. And so it’s not surprising, therefore, that even in the church we see this shepherd imagery in the word “pastor” which both *comes* from the Latin word for “shepherd” *and* is also related to the word “pasture,” or the *feeding* or *grazing* of sheep.

Moreover, this notion of leadership associated with the role of a shepherd continues to this very day. Among the collection of books on leadership in my office, for instance, there is one entitled “Shepherd Leadership: Wisdom For Leaders From Psalm 23.” Now you might automatically conclude that a book with this kind of title would have been written by a *pastor*. But, in reality, its authors are a couple of university professors; a business professor from Baylor University, and a professor of public policy and law

at Pepperdine University. And the entire *thrust* of their book is applying this notion of shepherd leadership, as found in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, to the *corporate* world; believe it or not.

And the reason *why* the notion of leadership is so directly connected to this idea of shepherding has to do with the actual *caring* of sheep – and also how similar it is, then, to the caring of people.

For example, cattle, as I understand it, need to be driven from *behind*, the way you see it done in those Old Westerns where the cowboys ride behind the herd, whistling and hooting at the cows to keep them moving in the direction they need to be going. But it's entirely different with sheep, apparently. They prefer to be *led*. As Scott Hoeszee writes, "Sheep, it seems, have an uncanny ability to form a trusting relationship with their shepherds." And, as Barbara Brown Taylor has pointed out, in the Middle East to this day you can sometimes see three or four Bedouin shepherds and their flocks all arrive at a watering hole at about the same time. The sheep quickly mix and mingle until the three or four individual flocks have disappeared and have formed one big mega-flock. But the shepherds don't seem to mind. Because when it's time to go, each shepherd gives his own distinctive whistle, or sings his own unique little song, and immediately his sheep leave the others behind, form back into their *own* flock, and then follow that shepherd whom they've come to trust.

Are people any different? Or are we *also* basically wired to connect with and then follow a leader – a shepherd, if you will – who we have come to trust?

All of this, of course, forms the backdrop for our scripture lessons this morning. A little bit ago, I mentioned that the term "shepherd" was often used in the ancient world to denote a king or ruler. And it's this sense of the word that we have illustrated in that beloved

psalm we heard once again this morning: the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. “The *Lord* is my shepherd,” it says. And that image is so striking, and so descriptive, and so comforting, that *even today* – even among those of us who know next to nothing about shepherds or sheep, and even among those who are not particularly religious – people nevertheless *cherish* and *know* this psalm; many of them by heart.

I think that’s because, amidst all the problems, and dangers, and fears of this world, people are always *looking* and *hoping* for safety and sanctuary – the very things that that psalm promises. They long for a shepherd who, as Ken Carter has written, “watches over, protects, provides for, and creates a safe place for those under his care... People instinctively realize,” he says, “that when *God* is with us, we are in a safe place, a sanctuary.”

Today’s gospel, of course, also reminds us that Jesus once said to his followers, “I am the *good* shepherd.” It only stands to reason, of course, that there would be such things as “good” shepherds and, by the same token, “bad” shepherds as well. But then Jesus immediately goes on to explain *why* he should be considered the good shepherd. “The good shepherd,” he said, “lays down his life for the sheep.” The hired hand, however, who is *not* the shepherd (said Jesus), leaves the sheep and runs away when he sees the wolf coming. But the *good* shepherd, who truly cares for the sheep, is prepared to lay down his own life for them. “We know love by this,” said our second reading, “that Jesus Christ laid down his life for us...”

You see, the primary tasks of a Middle Eastern shepherd included healing the wounded and sick sheep, finding and saving any sheep who were lost or trapped, loving them and sharing their lives, and, in this way, *earning* their trust. Finally, it was also the responsibility of the shepherd to watch out for any enemies who might threaten the flock, and to then, if need be, also *defend* the sheep – at the risk of their own lives – from those very enemies.

Now some scholars point out that the word in today's gospel translated as "good" doesn't fully capture the essence of what's being said here. You see, it can also be translated with words such as "noble," or "ideal," or "genuine," or "model," as in the *model* shepherd, and also "true," as in the *true* shepherd. Therefore, what Jesus is saying here is that he's not merely a *good* shepherd; what he is, really, is the *noble, ideal, and genuine* shepherd. In other words, the *perfect* shepherd. Why? Because he was *willing* to lay down his life for the sheep. And, ultimately, as we know, that's *exactly* what Jesus did... Just like Tom Mariano's lieutenant during the Korean War.

That brave young officer was a *shepherd* to his men, wasn't he? Indeed it could even be said that he was a "noble" shepherd. He watched out and cared for them. And when the time came, when the circumstances dictated it, when there was no other way to protect them and keep them alive, he was even willing to lay down his own life for them. And, *in return*, he only asked one thing "Remember me to your children," he said. Those were the very last words they ever heard from him; quite likely the very last words he ever spoke on this earth.

And, when we stop to think about it, we realize that all four gospels recall that Jesus *also* had a single, parting request as well. Each in its own way, each of the four gospels, recounts how Jesus sent his followers out into the world, similarly asking only one thing of them: "Remember me to your children."

You can look at the whole New Testament and summarize Jesus' entire message with that one phrase: "Remember me... to your children." In fact, you can analyze the Great Commission, and the founding of the church on Pentecost, and the missionary journeys of Paul, and the process by which the gospels were composed and handed down, and the flow of church history throughout the centuries, and they all amount to one thing – and one thing only –

remembering *Jesus* to our children. And not just our *own* children; not just our own flesh and blood and those whom we personally raise in our own homes. But “children” also in the sense of the “next generation.”

Alice Schimpf, my religion professor at Capital University, used to say that Christianity was always just *one* generation away from extinction. If just a single generation, she would point out to us, failed to “remember” Jesus to their children, both literally and figuratively, then the church, and Christianity itself, were doomed to die with them.

That’s an awesome responsibility, I know. It is, without a doubt, intimidating to think that the very future of the church depends on what you or I say and do. Personally, as I confessed last week, I am constantly worrying that I’m not doing enough, or that I’m not as effective as I should be – even as a pastor. Many times, I think afterwards about situations where I might have *easily* shared the good news of Jesus Christ with someone who seemed completely open and genuinely receptive to hearing it, yet failed *utterly* to do so.

Someone once said, “In the midst of a generation screaming for answers, Christians are stuttering.”

The well-known Baptist preacher and professor, Tony Campolo, tells the story of going to his 10 year high school reunion and running into one of his old buddies. They had both played basketball and always sat together at lunch. In the process of reconnecting at the reunion, this former classmate told Tony that about a year earlier he had had “the most fantastic experience” of his life. He had become a Christian, he said. He then explained the change that had come over him and the joy that he was now experiencing simply because of this relationship with Jesus Christ. He went on and on about his new life as a Christian.

When this friend finally paused to catch his breath, Tony interrupted him and said, “Jerry, I am so glad to hear this. You see, *I’m* a Christian too!” And Jerry immediately asked, “When did *you* become a Christian?” So Tony explained to him that he supposed it was when he was a little boy. To this, his old friend responded in amazement, “If you were a Christian when we were in high school together, how come you never *told me* about Jesus? How come *you* never introduced me to Christ?” As Campolo writes, “I didn’t know what to say.”

When Tom Mariano came home from the Korean War he owed a tremendous debt, one that he could never repay, to the man who had sacrificed his own life so that Tom and his fellow Marines might live. This man had asked for nothing in return, except that they “remember him” to their children.

Tom Mariano did that. He not only never forgot what had happened over there in Korea, but eventually he also told others the story of the man who had saved his life, and then even went so far as to name his firstborn son after that courageous lieutenant...

Those of us who call ourselves Christians similarly owe a tremendous debt, one that we could never hope to repay either, to the One who died for us on the cross. Yet Christ does not ask anything of us in return either *except...* that we *also* remember him to our children and to all who come after us.

So like Tom Mariano we strive never to forget. We “name” our children after Christ in the waters of baptism. And we seek to find ways to tell that wonderful story of the One who loved us *so much* that he died for us; the One to whom we owe our very lives; the One who only asks of us, “Remember me to your children.”

Amen.

