

I don't know about you, but when I read this gospel passage, it sounded like it shouldn't end there. I expected to turn the page and find more. Kind of feels like it's a set-up for something that's about to happen. Well if you thought that... you'd be right. It's a setup for what's coming up next week (*the story of the loaves and fishes*) and it's a jumping off point for a detour into the Bread of Life discourses from the Gospel of John. But enough of coming attractions, *what about* today's passage?

Besides feeling unfinished, the phrase “sheep without a shepherd” doesn't really connect with a lot of us in the room. The truth is most of us (over 30 anyway) don't suffer from a lack of a shepherd in our lives. In fact, we have too many shepherds surrounding us. In the secular world, we have media vying for our attention. The news outlets, dominated, of course, by political views try to pull us this way or that way. To solidify our support, they demonize the “other side” with outrageous claims and find a 10 second clip as evidence (probably taken out of context) to embolden the party line view. Yes, our problem is not only the number of shepherds out there in the secular world but the fact that they won't come together or get along for the sake of the whole. There's too much money and power to be gained by keeping people separated. Truth of the matter is, for most of us over 30, we're probably not going to change sides for the rest of our lives anyway.

What about in the world of faith? From an atheist's point of view there appears to be many religions out there to choose from. Some are a bit compatible or at least tolerant of the others, but a few are so exclusive that they believe in conversion, enslavement, or elimination of non-believers.

What about the Christian world? Well, again, there appears to be many shepherds and depending on which house of worship you walk into on a weekend you may not hear a consistent message. Even within our Catholic Church, the one that can actually trace its roots down to Christ and the Apostles, there's some controversy. We have one "top" earthly shepherd: Francis our Pope. He is very consistent on what he says, but I pray he's more careful how he says it because otherwise the secular media shepherds will attempt to spin it to fit their agenda. The real controversies right now are between bishops involving who is allowed to partake in this or that, and which behavior is sinful enough to be denied sacraments or whether it is sin at all. We need to get our house in order.

So, what should we do about all these shepherds? It's hard for us to discern, perhaps because we're invested significantly in some of them, and perhaps it's just a habit we can't break. The solution can be found in the example of those who fit the description "*sheep without a shepherd*" found in today's Gospel passage. It turns out they're all around us: the youth. Oh, they hear the cacophony of all the

shepherds out there and they *sort of* follow one or the other (maybe whatever's trendy at the moment) but they have a natural, healthy skepticism. They don't completely trust anyone. They hear the talk, but they see it as unrealistic with flawed results: empty promises. "Sex without consequences" -- well that doesn't match reality. "It's just a blob of tissue, not really human" -- they aren't buying it. "The government is the solution, they will take good care of us," -- guess again.

Who can they listen to? Who can they trust?

Last weekend I volunteered and chaperoned for the Steubenville conference at the Mayo Civic Center where 1600 high school students came to encounter the one shepherd that promises total love and sacrifice to His followers. Oh yes, the attendees had a great time together. They listened and danced to some incredible Catholic rock praise music (my ears are still ringing a little bit). They heard the witness and motivational talks of several nationally known Catholic speakers. Some of the talks were about the issues that today's young struggle with, but overall it was about Jesus being revealed to them, through others (and of course scripture), but most importantly as revealed in the Church He left us, including His most precious gift, the Eucharist. *This* shepherd they encountered offered everything they seek: healing, reconciliation, love, and meaning. And I think most came away significantly and deeply changed. Many will now reconsider how they will choose

and eventually live out their future vocations; as committed followers of the one *true* shepherd.

Now the hours were long for everyone, but *especially* if you were crazy enough (like Monica and me) to volunteer for multiple things. We were literally burning the candle at both ends. We got home at night just before midnight and were back at 7 AM in the mornings. And who do you think I saw coming in to hear the confessions of kids already waiting in line at 7:15 in the morning: our very own, newly ordained, Father Brian Mulligan. Pretty impressive. Consider that it was only a few years ago that Brian was attending conferences, first as a youth participant, then as a seminarian, a deacon, and now returning as a young shepherd himself.

Maybe those of us a bit older can learn from the example of these youth and reconsider who it is we let guide us. Or at least we should consider reprioritizing who and what comes first in our lives. Let us seek out and listen to the one and only true shepherd: Jesus Christ. May He reveal His plan for each of us.