

When was the last time you slowed down and took a break?

When was the last time you just relaxed and let all tension just glide away?

When was the last time you just smelled the air - and not just a sickening smell, but its good and life giving smell?

When was the last time you prepared a meal from scratch and felt good about the honest and pure flavor?

The answers may vary for each of us. Some of us may not have to think hard. If you're in this case then you probably have a good balance in life. Perhaps it is by accident or perhaps you are very deliberate about it.

Others of us, and I think this is the majority of us, have to think hard. Life is so fast paced. There are so many decisions that have to be made. There is so much work to do. Many people are bearing not only their own work schedules but also child care for their children or grandchildren. Some are also providing care for parents or elderly relatives. Decisions need to be made all the time. Someone or something has to lose

out all too often. Most people in our culture report being stressed, overworked and too busy.

Even faith can become a burden, and that is a burden that can become a downward spiral. Attending worship or church things are easy things to drop in an otherwise too busy schedule. You may feel guilty about it (then again, you might not) but there's no one there to tell you off for skipping. There's no penalty, no fine, no punishment. If you and your spouse don't agree on church issues it may even be a relief to skip church stuff. But ultimately you know that you're depriving your soul the spiritual nourishment and community it needs to thrive.

I've been thrilled the way our church council is aware of this problem. How can worship and your faith community be an oasis in an otherwise too busy life, rather than just one more thing to feel guilty about not doing well? That's a good question, and it's one worth wrestling with; as indeed we are.

Today is sometimes called "Good Shepherd Sunday" because we read the famous 23rd Psalm and in our gospel reading Jesus talks about being the good shepherd. This idea is ironic because in those days shepherds were not considered good. They were

usually ritually unclean because of the work they often had to do. They were notoriously crooked, sneaky, and deceitful. If you were a shepherd your evidence was not considered reliable in a court of law. To call someone a good shepherd was an oxymoron.

Of course there were indeed plenty of good shepherds. And the image of shepherds had been used for centuries by Jews as a way to describe their leaders and the way to describe their relationship with God - God was the shepherd, they were the sheep.

Sheep who had a good shepherd usually could count on a good life. A good shepherd would work hard to provide for their safety. A good shepherd would make sure there was plenty of water and adequate food. A good shepherd would fight off enemies and keep the sheep from going astray.

From working on a sheep farm in high school I've never found sheep keeping to be particularly nice work. I was not a good shepherd. And I laugh at the idea of sheep peaceably and calmly grazing on a lush green hillside overseen by a nice summer sun. That is simply not reality. But I do recognize

that with good care you can have a strong and robust flock of sheep.

There is nothing immediately offensive about calling Jesus the good shepherd. It's only later when you realize that if you call Jesus a shepherd you are therefore calling yourself a sheep. And that is a pretty humbling thing to do. That's no compliment!

Sheep are noisy, dirty, and just plain stupid. They have an incurable habit of wanting the very things that aren't good for them. They go astray. They break their boundaries. And when you have to catch them to give them medicine or shear them, more often than not they put up the fight of their lives.

You've probably all seen artwork depicting Jesus as the good shepherd and he's carrying a little lamb over his shoulders. Not likely. That's more fantasy than a movie poster for a science fiction film. Any lamb that docile has got to be deathly sick.

The problem with seeing Jesus as the good shepherd is that you've got to accept that you're a sheep. And with that then, you have to accept that many of the temptations you want to give

into are not good for you. It means that you will probably fight against the healthy things our Lord has for you. You will even struggle as our Lord tries his best to carry you back to the flock.

When all the world presses upon us in ways that we can clearly see and vividly feel, it is difficult to trust in a shepherd whom we cannot see and who often feels so distant. Our sheep qualities get the best of us. Instead of keeping to the fences that keep our lives from becoming too busy, we jump over them, or wiggle through them to indulge ourselves in overscheduling. Instead of accepting the medicine of discipline that we need for health we bolt away trying to avoid responsibility. Instead of staying to the clean grass and straw that would keep our fleeces clean we roll in the mud or lay in our own filth out of pure defiance or addiction.

Shepherding us cannot be easy, no matter how good we think we are. But our shepherd is good and he is persistent. When we make a mess Jesus is ready clean us up. When we get out of the fence Jesus will come and find us and invite us back. When we bolt away from responsibility Jesus is patient and caring.

The 23rd Psalm give us a warm and wonderful picture of being shepherded by our Lord. It tells us that we will have green pastures, we will have clean and clear water. We will have our needs met. We will be kept in safety. There is one very interesting line that let's not overlook too. It is "Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." The rod is a pretty easy one to understand. I shepherd would use it to fight off predators. The staff is a different story, but it is also one of comfort. A shepherd uses the staff to control the sheep, guide them, and even catch them. That's not always a pretty picture. A shepherd often has to use a very firm hand with stubborn sheep.

Much as we may not like it, we should accept that God may have to use a firm hand with us too. It is nice to talk about God as all loving. But let's never forget that true love also involves discipline and boundaries. God never said it would be pretty when he has to use tough love.

But that should make us all the more confident. God cares enough that he won't give up easily.

We should make sure that we always have time and space in our lives to allow God to nourish us: time for green pastures, still waters, and a restored spirit. If you don't do it

already, make time every day for God's nourishment. It may not be easy, you are a sheep after all, but God is a good shepherd.

Amen