

SUNDAY 04 EASTER B – Homily 02

“Shepherds of the Heart”

(Acts 4:7-12; Psalm 118; 1 John 3:1-2; John 10:11-18)

Jean Vanier, in his latest book *Becoming Human*, shares his personal transition in his notion of love. He used to think that love involved being good, being efficient, using one’s intelligence and time well and doing things for others.

Then he chose to live with the mentally challenged and found he was challenged to live his life on a whole different level. The mentally challenged weren’t impressed at all by his competence; they did not care about his degrees. They just wanted his love, his affection, his attention, they wanted to know him. They taught him the importance of relating from the heart. And that has made all the difference in his life. He now goes around the world teaching that wisdom.

What Jean Vanier learned and now teaches has implications for this Sunday’s celebration, Good Shepherd Sunday. We can learn from Jesus that same lesson – to shepherd one another from the heart. In fact, leadership in the area of human relationships may be the greatest unmet need in the world today.

In a world where divorce rates, gang violence, family breakups, teen pregnancies, addictions of all kinds and rates of incarceration are skyrocketing, the greatest need is not more laws, more social programs and institutions, but very simply loving committed relationships and secure family life.

Over the Easter weekend in our own archdiocese, two young men in separate communities were killed in gang-related violence. It seems that there is a ritual to belonging to a gang that involves killing someone, than one is really “in.” How tragic that the need to belong has come to this level, right here at home.

In a recent Cross Country Check-up program on CBC about the effectiveness of tougher laws to curb the violence in Vancouver, callers mentioned things like the need for tougher laws, more police enforcement, more educational programs and more money for daycare. Shockingly, only a

few mentioned the need for more loving relationships and stronger family life.

Cardinal Keith O'Brien of Scotland noted the same phenomena in his country. The reaction of the government to the same social crisis was to enact tougher laws. He called that putting a band-aid on the symptom and not addressing the real issue, a lack of spirituality and love in today's society.

I am convinced that the deepest need of our youth, indeed, of every human being, is to be loved, to belong and to be valued. If these needs are met by loving parents, supportive nuclear and extended families and welcoming churches, then our youth won't need to resort to drugs to feel loved, to gangs to feel that they belong, or to indulge in pre-marital sex to feel valued.

There is a great need today for leaders, for Good Shepherds, who will model how to establish long-lasting relationships, how to form solid loving families where the emotional needs of the children are met.

Jesus in today's gospel about the Good Shepherd models that kind of love. He is one who, as Jean Vanier learned, shepherds from the heart, and invites us to do the same.

There are three aspects in the gospel to that kind of shepherding: self sacrifice, intimacy and unity.

A Good Shepherd will lay down his life for others. This is what Jesus did and calls us to do as well. This runs contrary to so much of the leadership that is prevalent in our society today. That philosophy is based on greed and selfishness which I believe is at the root of the global economic recession.

Can we learn from this crisis to finally listen to what Jesus has been teaching us all along? Politicians are to serve the needs of their communities. Bankers are to serve the needs of their clients. Married people are to meet each others needs first. Parents are to meet the emotional needs of their children. That comes before career and personal desires. To do that is to fulfill your God-given role as a parent.

The second aspect of shepherding that Jesus speaks about is relationships, knowing one another, intimacy. That is what Jean Vanier learned from the

mentally challenged and what ultimately transformed him. We need leaders, shepherds, who will teach us how to enter into committed life-time relationships and friendships. We need shepherds who will teach us how to form community, how to achieve intimacy in our lives. Every human being longs for intimacy, yet we are so afraid of it because genuine love means being vulnerable to being hurt, and no one wants to be hurt again. To be fully human, however, is to love and to be open to all that genuine love may bring into one's life.

The Missionary Oblates who have served in our archdiocese for so many years are a religious congregation, not diocesan priests. Yet for over a century they have sacrificed community life for the sake of the mission, serving alone in isolated missions across the north of Canada. Now we are realizing that community life, precisely, has become their mission. It is a challenge to find Oblates who can and will live together and minister together as teams. Apostolic community has become for us a goal to be realized in our own archdiocese.

The last aspect that Jesus mentions in the gospel is unity. Genuine love seeks to bring people together, to unite, to establish harmonious relationships between different groups. That is a challenge in a pluralistic society, but one that we must try to meet as families, as church and as organizations within our society. This calls for a great deal of respect, understanding, tolerance and communication.

That, in fact, is what I experienced growing up in the small district of Highgate, Saskatchewan, which was a mixed community of French, English, Ukrainian and German rural folk who were both Protestant and Catholic and got along famously. What a gift that was to me as a child, one that I take into my adult years.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is a Shepherd's meal that makes present the love of the Good Shepherd in Word and deed, and calls us to go out and be shepherds ourselves, shepherds of the heart.