

Merciful God, creator of all the peoples of the earth and lover of souls. Have compassion on all who do not know you as you are revealed in your Son Jesus Christ; let your Gospel be preached with grace and power to those who have not heard it; turn the hearts of those who resist it; and bring home to your fold those who have gone astray; that there may be one flock under one Shepherd, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Some of you may have remembered this prayer from Good Friday. It stirs up an image of Jesus as a shepherd, patiently waiting for his flock to return. Now, on the 4th Sunday of Easter, in today's reading, we again have an image of Jesus as a shepherd—not just a shepherd, but a good shepherd waiting for us to return to his fold.

Can you envision Jesus waiting for his flock to return and caring for **us** and carrying **us** on his shoulders, willingly laying down his life for **us**?

Hold on to this image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd. In today's Gospel we hear Jesus teaching us to be Good Shepherds. Jesus teaches us by using a metaphor to compare a good shepherd to a hired hand. This hired hand does not care for the flock like a Good Shepherd because the hired hand runs away when he sees the wolf coming. This hired hand lacks the care and responsibility for the sheep and is only interested in his own well-being. But Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, would protect his sheep and sacrifice himself for his flock.

So, are you a Good Shepherd or a hired hand?

As we contemplate this answer, let us first see how this story applies to us individually and as a community.

The Gospel reading highlights the importance of caring for God's Creations instead of caring for one's self-interest. This suggests that being a good shepherd means being stewards of our faith and building a compassionate relationship with each other, by paying it forward and helping those in need.

This compassionate relationship requires all of us to be good shepherds by helping friends, family members, or community, assisting them with our words and actions. When we help, to carry an individual or community on our shoulders, we are caring for all of God's creation.

As a community, you all demonstrate what it means to be a Good Sheperd. You are all supportive, responsible, and protectively caring for others. This community demonstrates these qualities by taking care of the health, safety, and overall well-being of both the community inside and outside of these walls.

I have watched you all being Good Shepherds by feeding over 60,000 people, collecting over 400 books for your little library, fighting for affordable housing in Alexandria, caring for social justice, and collecting and giving away over 2,000 diapers.

I am sure there are many other projects I did not mention, and I know that there will be many more. I am thankful that as a church community you are living into your baptismal vows and being Good Shepherds.

You have done all these things while shepherding me as your seminarian. You have all carried me either knowingly or unknowingly on your shoulders as I learn and discern my call for my future vocation.

As I wind up my first year as your seminarian, I am grateful to be in such a loving, inviting and shepherding community. I would like to share with you a reflection that I wrote about my experience here at the Church of the Resurrection. This reflection demonstrates not only how much you have touched my life but also how you all carried me on your shoulders.

I call this reflection, *Finding My Voice*.

My experience as a seminarian has taught me many different things about myself and my relationship with God. The first thing that this experience has taught me is that at times I needed to step into my box of comfort, which then allows me to step back out of the box with courage and confidence. This stepping out of my box allowed me to participate in leadership roles and to find my voice in places and situations that I have found intimidating. An example of an intimidating place was to be a leader or facilitator for an adult forum.

My first adult forum was on October 29 and the topic was Prayer Movement. This topic allowed me to step back into my comfort zone as a dancer, giving me the courage to transfer my past life into a new ministerial role. Stepping back into my box made me feel less vulnerable and increased my confidence. This growth in confidence allowed me

to find my voice and the willingness to share during the Ruth and Naomi forum and the courage to create and deliver other forums.

I continued to find my voice for leadership by leading the Liturgy of the Word. This was one of the biggest challenges that I needed to face. This task was an extremely humbling experience for me because it required me to read and not to lose my place in the liturgy. And each week as this dyslexic thinker stumbled over words, accidentally changed the order of the liturgy, or left something out of the liturgy, you all demonstrated grace and compassion by going with the flow, which helped me to realize that even in my own limitations and struggles I can still be a faithful leader.

These discoveries helped me to lean into my call and to continue to discern what God is calling me to do for my future ministry. This discernment helped me to enhance my relationship with God and to deepen my awareness of having a trusting relationship with God while I tackled my struggles and challenges.

So, are you a Good Shepherd or a hired hand? I would say that this congregation is filled with Good Shepherds!

I am grateful to each of you for embodying the spirit of the Good Shepherd. I look forward to working with you all next year as I prayerfully discern my future path in ministry.

Let us unite our hearts and hands to serve the community and nurture God's creation. Amen