

Homily for Wednesday in the Fifth Week of Easter

May 13, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Acts 15:1–6; Psalm 122; John 15:1–8

Looking back, my own spiritual journey with John’s gospel and today’s gospel lesson really began a few months after beginning work as rector of Trinity Church, Michigan City, Indiana. I arrived in December 1988. In the spring, I attended a workshop at our cathedral on formation programs for children. There I was introduced to the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, an approach to Christian formation for children that evolved from the collaboration of a Hebrew scholar, Sofia Cavalletti, and a Montessori teacher, Gianna Gobi, in Rome in the early 1950s.

It started with Sofia reading the beginning of John’s gospel to six-year-old children who were preparing for first communion. Mutual friends connected Sofia and Gianna. Together they began to work with three- to six-year-old children in their local Roman Catholic parish. They discovered, to quote the website of association of here in the United States, “The 3-6-year-old child is particularly capable of receiving and enjoying the most essential elements of our faith—the announcement of God’s love especially experienced

through Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who died and is risen.”¹

That summer, the association was holding formation course for adults, who prepare the environment and guide the work of the children, at the University of Notre Dame. The parish was ready for something new. I asked two women to attend the course. I sat in some of the days. That fall we started with the first level, for the three- to six-year-old child, knowing that we adults needed much more formation, especially what Sofia called, in her book *The Religious Potential of the Child*, “Education to Wonder and Kingdom of God”²—the response of children to God in their lives.

They discovered that a five-or six-year old child derives deep joy and peace when he or she realizes that he or she is one of Jesus’ sheep. One Sunday during our second year, I sat in our atrium on a Sunday morning as an observer—just sitting there. It happened to be the Sunday in Easter Season when the Good Shepherd material was being presented. When one of the catechists said, “I wonder who these sheep are?” One five-year-old boy said something like,

¹ <https://www.cgsusa.org/discover/cgs-approach/>, (accessed 12 May 2020).

² Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia Coulter and Julia Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 138–50.

“Maybe me.” I did not know until after the program that it was the first time one of the children had said this. There were tears in the catechists’ eyes when told me.

By the time I left Michigan City, we had all three levels of this catechesis, three to six, six to nine, and nine to twelve. I came to learn that something of the same spiritual awareness and identity for six- to nine-year-old children comes from their work with today’s gospel lesson, Jesus and the True Vine.

Let me jump ahead to 2005. Dr. Ryan Lesh has been sponsored for ordination to the priesthood from Saint Mary’s, and he’s studying at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific. When he knows enough Greek, he applies to be in a seminar given by New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders, now retired, at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. At some point he sent me copy of Schneider’s book extraordinary book called *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. She wrote, “There are, in John’s theology, no ‘second generation’ Christians. All are, as were the original disciples, in direct relationship with Jesus, who is present and active . . . They are branches

in the vine, sheep of Jesus' flock, whom Jesus himself feeds with his own flesh and blood.”³

Let me close with words from Psalm 95, normally used at the beginning of Daily Morning Prayer. This psalm includes these words, “Come, let us bow down, and bend the knee, and kneel before the Lord our Maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Oh, that today you would hearken to his voice!”⁴

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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³ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2003), 77.

⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 82.