

4th Sunday of Easter - B

I'd like to introduce you to Stan and Sophie, a married couple who just recently had their first child, Gina.

Gina was born about a month early, and so her arrival was not as planned for as her parents had hoped. For one thing Stan was out of town when Sophie's mom called and said that she was at the hospital and in labor and he had to rush back.

Stan got there just in time to be a part of the delivery and to hold his new baby daughter shortly after she was born. Both parents were, of course, overjoyed that their baby had been born without complications: healthy, beautiful, vocal, full of life and possibility.

Stan's joy was particular in that he was ten years older than Sophie and still getting over the shock really that she had found him worth marrying. He had spent a lot of years thinking that marriage just wasn't in the cards for him—Miss Right had never come along—and he had gotten to the point of thinking that he should just move on from that hope.

And then to find Sophie, who obviously loved him for who he was, and now to have a daughter who, after only a minute or two, had already stolen his heart—it's was overwhelming.

There wasn't anyone in the delivery room who doubted him when he exclaimed, "From now on, nothing else matters—just these two. I would give my life for them."

We who are gathered here today would probably not doubt it, either. In our own lives we have either

4th Sunday of Easter - B

known people in similar circumstances or have been in such circumstances ourselves where we have felt such love and commitment.

It's a bit ironic, then, that when we hear Jesus saying in today's gospel that he would lay down his life for us, his sheep, we have trouble believing him. In fact, he says it five times in this short passage and still we are plagued with the question of whether it is really true.

We should look into that a bit. Do we doubt it because we are not sure that he even knows us all that well? After all, there are over a billion Catholic Christians living in the world today. Maybe we are willing to believe that he loves some of us enough to lay down his life for them, but are just not sure about whether we fall into that category.

Or it could be that we think that there was a time when Jesus might have been willing to lay down his life for us—when we were sweet and innocent little babies, for example, but given what we've become—sinners in need of forgiveness—we may have arrived at the point of thinking that whatever loving feelings God held for us surely have passed by now.

Of course, neither of these conclusions fit with what we hear in the Gospel. They don't take into account the nature of God, either.

Stan was not expressing his commitment to Sophie and Gina as something he chose so much as the truth of who he had become. His life had been bound up

4th Sunday of Easter - B

with theirs in such a way that it was just the truth that he would lay down his life for them.

That's really what Jesus is saying, too. God is love. That's the reality of it. And when God becomes human that love expresses itself in human form persistently, unconditionally, beyond the point of choosing. Jesus, in his use of the image of the Good Shepherd, is inviting us, pleading with us really, to believe in such a God, a God whose love is mirrored in lives and moments such as when parents welcome a new born into the world, but who sustains that love as a permanent and eternal reality, meant for all and available to all.

In his book [Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander](#) Thomas Merton, the monk and spiritual writer who lived in Gethsemane monastery in Kentucky wrote of a revelation he had one day in downtown Louisville: *“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time.”*

4th Sunday of Easter - B

I can't really imagine what that must have been like, never having experienced such a moment, but I do find encouragement in the fact that someone, one of us mere mortals, has been given to know how God thinks of us, each of us, and all of us together, with no exceptions, and in permanent fashion.

That has got to make a difference, if we give it space enough to be true. Maybe it won't change everything just yet, but surely it can set us in the right direction, leaving it to God to finish what he started.

4th Sunday of Easter - B

1. The story of Stan and Sophie and their daughter Gina.
 - Gina born a month early; Stan was out of town, had to rush back.
 - Got there just in time; both parents overjoyed
 - Stan's particular joy: still getting over the shock that Sophie had married him; had given up on finding someone; now, not only Sophie but Gina, too. It was overwhelming.
 - No one could doubt his saying, "From now on, nothing else matters—just these two. I would give my life for them."
2. We would probably not doubt it either, because
 - We have known people in similar circumstances, or
 - Have felt such love and commitment ourselves
3. A bit ironic, when we hear Jesus saying the same thing and yet we find it hard to believe. Why is that?
 - Not sure he even knows us among the billion Catholics of today. He might love some of them, but us? Not sure.
 - Maybe there was a time when he could have done that—when we were still innocent babies, but now? When we're sinners? Surely any loving feelings have passed.

4th Sunday of Easter - B

4. These conclusions do not fit the Gospel, don't take into account the nature of God:

Stan was not expressing a choice so much as articulating a truth about who he had become; his life had been bound up with theirs. It was just the truth that he would lay down his life for them.

5. That's what Jesus is saying, too. God is love. That's the reality of it.

God in human form loves persistently, unconditionally, beyond the point of choosing.

Jesus is inviting us, pleading with us, to believe in such a God.

His love is mirrored in the lives and moments such as Stan's and Sophie's and Gina's

But his is sustained as a permanent reality.

6. Thomas Merton's moment of revelation:

In his book [Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander](#) Thomas Merton, the monk and spiritual writer who lived in Gethsemane monastery in Kentucky wrote of a revelation he had one day in downtown Louisville: *"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach,*

4th Sunday of Easter - B

the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time."

7. Never had that experience, but it's encouraging nonetheless:

One of us mere mortals has been given to know how God thinks of us.

That has got to make a difference, maybe not all at once, but setting us in the right direction.