

As I prepared for today's homily, I was reminded of a story a wise priest shared with me many years ago:

A woman read an article about the benefits of cod-liver oil for dogs. Wanting the best for her little four-legged friend, she went out and purchased the best cod-liver oil she could find.

Every evening, she got down on the floor, pried open her dog's mouth, and poured the oil down its throat. Of course, once the dog saw the bottle, it would try to escape her grasp. One evening, during the usual struggle, cod-liver oil spilled all over the floor.

Once the dog got free from the woman's grasp, to her great surprise, it returned to lick up the spilled oil.

You see, it wasn't the oil the dog was resisting, but rather, the dog resisted the method used to deliver it.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, as someone willing to lay down his life for us, for all of humanity. This is really one of my favorite images of Jesus because it captures the tenderness, the mercy, and the overwhelming love that God has for each one of us.

At the start of his ministry, Jesus said that he came to restore sight to the blind, to give freedom to the captives, and to heal the broken hearted. That means that Jesus came into this world and comes into our lives to bring healing and forgiveness, to give us strength when we are weak and to be with us on our journey of faith. And later in John's gospel, Jesus gives us the beautiful message that he no longer calls us servants, but friends.

Does that mean we can do whatever we want without consequence? Absolutely not! God gave us the gift of our conscience and the responsibility to use it. God gives us the gift of the Church, of faith communities, to help us along our journey, to help us stay faithful to the gospel.

Each one of us is born with the seed of faith deep in our hearts, but like any seed, it has to be nourished and cultivated in order for it to grow and bear fruit. How do we do that?

- We spend time in prayer.
- We participate in the sacraments of the Church.
- We gather in prayer and are nourished at this table,
- We join together to give witness to God's love and to be strengthened by one another.

As the seed of faith grows, we blossom into the beautiful and unique creatures God created us to be.

Following Jesus means that we choose to do the right thing because we love him. When we truly accept God's love into our lives, we can't keep it inside, we want to share it and reach out to one another with love and compassion. Faith is meant to transform us, to help us see the world around us with new eyes. Just as we are loved by God, we too are challenged to love God, to love one another, and as equally important, to love ourselves; to see ourselves as worthy of God's love and mercy.

While it is true that we can choose to turn away from God and we can choose to embrace sin, that doesn't mean that God stops loving us. Rather, our Good Shepherd continues to reach out, to offer the hand of friendship, to bring us back to the fold. Look at the world around us, look at all the unrest, the violence, the suffering. That's what happens when people reject the call of love. True peace, true happiness can only come from God.

Early Christians were a diverse group, described in our second reading as coming from every nation, race, people, and tongue. What inspired them to abandon their own traditions and become followers of Jesus, a persecuted minority? The power of love! They witnessed how God's love transformed the lives of believers, and they were inspired to follow.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, offers us the same unconditional love that was offered to those early Christians. God promises to shelter us from the storms of life, to wipe away the tears from our eyes, to never abandon us, and to hold us closely to the loving heart of Jesus. God is with us no matter where we find ourselves in life. What an extraordinary promise.

The question for us to ponder is how we will respond to that love; how we can nurture our faith and follow Christ, our Good Shepherd, not only today, but for the rest of our lives.

Today, Alex comes before us seeking baptism. After worshiping with us for over a year, Alex has asked to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, to be washed with the waters of Christ, to be anointed with sacred oil and to put on the clothes of Christ. As we baptize Alex, let us all pray for a deeper experience of God's love for her and for one another, so that, together, we can radiate God's love to the world around us.