

Children

Good morning, You see that I on many occasions have to use a cane to walk without falling down. You see the curved part of the cane, here at the top. What does that part do? (Let them answer.) That's right. The curved part is the handle you hold onto when you want to walk. And then the cane will help to hold you up, like a third leg.

But if you turn the cane around, and hold onto it down here at the bottom, then what does the curved part remind you of? (Let them guess.) That's right. Now the cane turns into a shepherd's crook. You see, we could use this curved part to catch a sheep by the foot and pull him back if he is getting into trouble. That's what a good shepherd does.

If a wild animal came along and started chasing after a sheep, the shepherd could use the cane to chase the wild animal away. He could swing the stick at the wild animal, and even hit it with the curved end. A good shepherd will sometimes do dangerous things to help the sheep.

Nobody would expect a shepherd to get himself killed just to protect the sheep, would they? (Talk about it.) That would be very unusual. But the Bible tells us about one special shepherd who did that. Who was that shepherd? (Let them tell you.) Right. Jesus is our good shepherd. He loves and takes care of us. He keeps us out of trouble and he chases trouble away when we need protection. But Jesus did something extra. Jesus even died for us. He did it so that we could live with God in heaven. It wouldn't make much sense if a shepherd lost his life and then left the sheep without protection. But this shepherd didn't stop there. Jesus died for us, to show us God's great love, but then he came back to life again. He has shown us how far he will go to protect us, but he also has shown us that he will never leave us alone.

I

In the United States, most of our ranches are self-contained. By that, I mean that the rancher has his own fields for crops or grazing and his own facilities to care for his livestock.

That is not the case in the most of the rest of the world, not just the ancient world of Jesus, but even in the modern world. In much of the world, the animals belonging to various families are kept together in a large pen. This is particularly true regarding sheep.

Now sheep all look alike, perhaps except to each other. So if there are 200 sheep in a pen, how is a shepherd able to pick out his 50 sheep? Actually, the sheep do the work. The shepherd just stands at the entrance of the pen and calls to his sheep, or perhaps he just sings to them. His sheep know his voice and follow him out. If he is going through the hills and comes across another shepherd with his sheep going in the opposite direction, the sheep will mingle together. Each shepherd will just keep singing or calling, and their own sheep will follow their Master's voice.

Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. His sheep know his voice. We are His sheep. We know His voice. We know if something we hear is coming from him or from another source.

Feeling safe is one of our most primal instincts. We can see that now, during our pandemic, when just about everything we do can make us afraid. Did I touch some metal? Did I wash my hands a lot? Is that person far enough from me? Did I pick up the virus from that person who sneezed? Will my mask be effective protection?

So our hearing of the Gospel today, which presents Jesus in several metaphors involving being a shepherd, ought to deeply console us. Especially, probably only scripture scholars are the only ones

to notice that in today's first reading, Peter in his Pentecost Sermon right after experiencing the Holy Spirit, calls Jesus LORD. He uses the same Jewish term which is translated as Lord as the term used for the word GOD. Right from the beginning the Church acknowledged the divinity of Jesus.

We know this in many ways. First, we can tell if He is calling us to do something or not do something through our conscience. We know right from wrong. We do not have to be moral theologians to know that people who post hurtful things about others on the internet are doing something very wrong. We do not get our morality from civil law. We don't judge the merits of something according to whether or not there is a law about it. Our civil laws must flow from our morality. Our morality should not be determined by our civil law. A law may be needed to protect society, but right or wrong is not determined by the law; the Voice of God determines it. We also know that whether we are caught or not has nothing to do with whether something is right or wrong. For example, we might be driving in our neighborhood and can see clearly enough that there are no police cars around. But we don't speed because there may be children outside playing, or folks crossing the street in the middle of the block. We do not want to endanger the life of a little child or another person just because we are in a hurry. There is no law saying that we should look in on the elderly man two houses down who didn't pick up his paper yesterday, but it is the right thing to do. Right or wrong is determined by conscience, not by law.

Sometimes people will say, "Catholic guilt" when we do not feel right with something we have done or not done. They act as though the Church is imposing guilt upon them. That is not true. Conscience is not imposed upon us from outside of us. It is within us. A conscience committed to doing the right thing is itself the Voice of the Good Shepherd. Sure, other voices try to draw us away from that which is right, but we listen to the voice we need to follow. What is imposed upon us from the outside is not guilt, what is imposed upon us is the immorality of a society that calls us to follow it instead of follow the Voice of God.

Our conscience also speak to us by continually asking us, "How well am I living my Christianity?" The Christian lives his or her Christianity throughout daily life, in the home, at the workplace, in the world. Many of the young and not so young, make time to volunteer in our parish ministries for the poor and homebound, the Pregnancy Center, or in other ministries such as the Shepherd Center, Hospice, the Cold Night Shelter, Project Hope, etc. You are acting on the voice you hear within you saying, "I have to do something to help out. I am only doing what a Christian must do to be a Christian."

Sometimes, we have to perk up our ears to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. There are so many distractions in life, that we have to listen closely to hear His voice. That is why we need to make time in our lives for daily prayer. Those prayers we say at night or in the morning every day give us the opportunity to hear His voice and to follow our Shepherd.

There are times, though, that we need help discerning the voice of the Lord. Life is complicated. We often have to ask ourselves, "Is this coming from the Lord or from another source, like my pride or ambition, etc?" Jesus gave us a guide to answer this question. He said, "Check the fruit." Actually, he said, "By their fruit you will know them." What are the long-range results of an action or inaction? Are they good or bad? For example, people will say that there is nothing wrong with taking this or that drug. Look down the road apiece. Have people who have been doing this for years fallen into deeper problems? Have bad relationships been established and good relationships been destroyed?

We can still be confused though. Sometimes we need to meet with people who may have insight into the best direction we should take in some given situation or other. So we go to a priest or deacon, or a spiritual director. Maybe ask a question in confession or we make an appointment for a sit down. We do this to get help with sorting out the complications of life. This is what deacons and we priests do, and we are honored that you share your concerns with us and are asking us to apply the Church's teaching to your situation. We may not have the answers you seek immediately, but we do know where to look.

In the second part of the Gospel Jesus adds that not only is He the Good Shepherd, He is the Sheep-gate. He is our protection against thieves and marauders who would steal and destroy our souls. The New Testament proclaims that all who stay united to Christ will live forever. It makes no difference what other people attempt to do to us, no matter how they attack us. They cannot destroy that Life that He has given us, the Life we celebrate particularly at Easter-time. Nothing can destroy His Life. The Sheep Gate protects us from eternal death. Yes, we may even suffer from a terminal illness that is attacking our body, but, like a dying 14 year old boy once told me, "Nothing can take Jesus from me." We may be in a horrible family situation and be afraid for others and for ourselves, but with the Lord, the negativity can become a source of growth as we are determined to find a way to draw closer to the Lord through the negatives of our lives. Or perhaps, we suffer from some form of psychological problem. We may be in recovery, but are continually battling the addiction. We do not fight alone. We fight with the Lord, who protects us from the terrors of life.

Today's Gospel forces us to ask ourselves, "Whose voice is it that I am following? Is it the voice of the immoral elements of our society? Is it the voice of the popular but self-absorbed? Or do I follow the voice of the Lord?"

As always, we pray today for the courage to be Catholic.

II

Churches are funny places. Have you ever noticed that?

Burt Kettinger tells about a small church in Rocky River, Ohio, just west of Cleveland where he grew up. This church had a small restroom behind the pulpit with a door right behind the pulpit for the convenience of the pastor. There was also a door on the other side of the restroom that led out to the church parking lot.

One day the pastor was waxing eloquent on Rev. 3:20. With great pathos he exclaimed that the Lord is standing at the door of our hearts crying, "Let Me in. Let Me in!"

Adding a touch of drama to his message the pastor walked back to the restroom door behind the pulpit. He knocked on it and again reminded the congregation that God was at our heart's door crying, "Let Me in. Let Me in!" when suddenly back from behind the closed door came the plaintive cry, "Just a minute. Just a minute."

Certainly that was a service that small congregation remembered for a long time.

We want to talk this morning about a service that happened two thousand years ago that the church of Jesus Christ is still talking about today. On the day of Pentecost Simon Peter preached an amazing sermon. The result was that three thousand persons were added to the Church that day. It was the birthday of the church and on June 4 we will celebrate that historic occasion. But then what happened after those 3,000 were converted? Does the story end there?

We know that it ends there for many people. There are those who go to an evangelistic crusade or to a very meaningful retreat or to a richly rewarding spiritual life weekend and get extremely enthusiastic about their faith . . . for a while. But soon the enthusiasm cools. The fervor subsides. Before long they are back in a deeper rut than before.

Is that what happened when those three thousand were converted that first Pentecost? No, indeed. We read, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

In these few verses we have the true essence of the church--who we are and what we are about. The church, first of all, is a community gathered for study and for worship. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer . . ." That is why you came to this place today. Henry Ward Beecher once said, "The church is not a gallery for the exhibition of eminent Christians but a school for the education of imperfect ones." So we keep coming back [to Sunday school]. And we keep coming back to worship. Actually our standards for study and worship are minimal at best.

I was reading about our Moslem friends. One of the largest universities in the world is the Al-Azar in Cairo. This Mohammedan institution, with something like twenty-one thousand students, requires every applicant to repeat the Koran from memory. Think about that for a minute. The Koran is about the same length as the New Testament. Three days are required to recite it. How would you fare with the New Testament? Perhaps we do not demand as much from Christian disciples as we ought. For some people, simply coming to worship is asking too much.

You probably know the story about the little boy who went to church with his grandparents. His grandmother sat in the choir. It really disturbed her to see grandfather nod off to sleep every Sunday in the middle of the sermon.

Finally, she decided on a plan. She gave her little grandson fifty cents each Sunday morning to poke grandpa in the ribs whenever he fell asleep. This plan worked until Easter Sunday morning. The church was packed. Grandmother was sitting in the choir. She noticed grandfather nodding off. However, Tommy made no effort to wake him. Grandfather even started snoring right there in the crowded Easter service. Still Tommy did nothing.

After the service grandmother was quite disturbed. She said, "Tommy what happened? You knew I would pay you fifty cents after the service if you kept grandfather awake."

Tommy said, "Yes Ma'am, but grandfather offered me a \$1.00 if I would let him sleep."

Many of us can sympathize with grandfather. Worship is not the most exciting place sometimes. But I like another little story concerning two boys who were talking about Noah and the ark. They were thinking about the odors and the noise and the inconvenience of being cooped up on the boat with all of those animals--about how crowded and about how dirty and how smelly it must have been, and about the problem of separating animals that were natural enemies and so on.

One of the boys said, "I just don't think I could stand that."

And the other little boy thought for a while and he said, "Well, yes, it must have been awful. But think of it the other way. It was still the best thing afloat."

I believe that about the church. Sometimes this is not the most exciting place to be, and sometimes church people are not all they ought to be. It is still the best thing afloat. Those early believers were certainly excited about it. They met regularly for study and for worship.

They not only studied and worshiped, however. They also had great fellowship. They broke bread together, they talked together, they laughed together, they sang together. "See how those Christians love one another," observers declared. **PLINY PROOF OF CHRISTIANITY**

It must have been a joyous experience being part of that first church. Any church that's doing what it ought to be doing is a joyous place to be. **Next Sunday vip** [Fellowship suppers, softball games, choir picnics, Vacation Bible School, youth meetings, volleyball games]--these things may not seem very spiritual to many people, but we would be making a terrible mistake if we were to minimize the importance of fellowship to the life of the church.

Christian fellowship is one of the greatest gifts that we have to offer the world. Even if I were a pagan, I would want my children to be in Sunday school--I would want my teenager to be in a church youth group--I would want my aging mother to be in a senior citizens group at the church. Even if I did not see much theological content there, I would want those I love to have the benefit of being among Christian people.

I remember a Peanuts comic strip many years ago. Charles Shultz has a way of looking into our hearts. He has Lucy saying, "It's my life." Sounds like Lucy, does it not? "It's my life and I'll do whatever I want with it. I'm my own person. It's my life and I'm the one who has to live it." In the last frame she grins and adds, "With a little help." We all need that little bit of help from our friends.

Harry Golden, that wonderful Jewish storyteller, tells of a time in his youth when he asked his father, who was not a believer, "Dad if you don't believe in God, why do you go to the synagogue regularly?" Harry Golden's father answered, "Jews go to the synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkel, who is Orthodox, goes to talk to God. I go to talk with Garfinkel."

To be sure, that is not the best reason for coming to church. But that is missing the point. When we were baptized into the Christian Church, we did not become an island unto ourselves. We became part of a body--the body of Christ. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian, except perhaps under the most unimaginable circumstances of deprivation.

Our word "fellowship" comes from an Anglo Saxon word "fee-lowship." Fee was an old Anglo-Saxon word for cow, which was the form of wealth in days of yore. Neighbors would put their cows together, breaking down the fences between them, to show trust in one another. They were creating fee-lowship through the mingling of their cows.

You need some place in your life where you can trust other people--where people will accept you just as you are and will not take advantage of you. The world is so often taking advantage of us. Church is a place where you can be loved just because you are a fellow believer in Jesus Christ.

Of course there are dangers, even in Christian fellowship. The greatest danger is that we could become just another clique--a group of people who are so turned inward that we are blind to the needs of others.

Dr. Eugene Brice tells about a guy who toured a factory. "This is the world's largest grease factory," the tour guide said as they started through the gigantic plant. They walked through rows of machines with gears turning, wheels revolving, cylinders whirling, belts running, huge motors roaring away. Toward the end of the tour the guy asked the guide, "What do you do with all the grease you make here? To whom do you sell it?"

The guide said, "Oh, no. We don't sell it. We have to use all the grease that we produce to lubricate the machinery here at the factory."

Here is a parable if I ever heard one. We can put all of our energy, all of our time in church to lubricating our own machinery--spending all our time planning our services, working on our finances, enjoying our fellowship opportunities **and ignoring the needs of the world outside.**

The number of those being added to the early church was increasing daily. That meant that they were constantly enlarging the fellowship. There is not much joy in a church that is not enlarging its circle of fellowship. If you keep fellowship to yourself, fellowship dies. When you keep enlarging that circle of fellowship you have life, hope, meaning, purpose and joy. The early disciples met together for study and worship and for fellowship. They broke bread together and they praised God with joy.**bring a friend to church We are a happy place aren't we?**

There is one more thing that characterized that early group of disciples. They spent much time in prayer. They recognized that theirs was not simply a human enterprise.

One Evangelical pastor, speaking about his own denomination said, "In Acts 2 they prayed for ten days, Peter preached for ten minutes and three thousand got saved. Today, churches pray for ten minutes, preach for ten days and three get saved."

That is quite a remarkable difference between the church at Pentecost and today's congregation, is it not? This is not merely a human enterprise. This is not simply another social organization.

E. Stanley Jones once said, "The streams that turn the machinery of the world take their rise in silent places."

You and I need a source of power for our lives, and we need a source of power for our church that comes from beyond our own energies, desires and commitment. It is a power that takes its rise in silent places. We need to spend time in prayer.

One of the most effective men who ever lived was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a lawyer already in his forties and living in South Africa when he conceived the idea of freeing India from foreign control. He never used a gun, he recruited no armies, he possessed no great personal fortune, he resorted to no fixes, no payoffs, no compromises. Virtually the only source of his power was prayer. Even while he was in South Africa, he began to crusade for his people's rights. At that time, South Africa was not a very good place to begin a crusade. He once wrote, "There was a law directed especially against Indians in South Africa and I had come there to oppose it. My ship was met by a hostile mob, and I was advised to stay on board for the sake of my physical safety, for the crowd had come with the announced intention of lynching me. I went ashore, nevertheless. I was stoned and beaten a good deal but I had not prayed for safety, but for the courage to face the mob. And that courage came and did not fail me."

Anyone who wants to be a witness for God is going to have to depend upon prayer. If this church, like the New Testament church, stands tall in our community, we are going to have to have the power of God undergirding us. There is only one way that power will come. That is through unceasing prayer. Going to sleep in prayer is one way to say good night and have the last thought on your mind God.

I confess that I've never preached a sermon that brought three thousand people to their knees. And I will confess again that this is not the most entertaining place you can be this morning. And certainly this church is not all God means for it to be. We all can confess that. Churches are funny places. Churches can be very sad places. Still, like Noah's Ark, we believe that it is the best thing afloat. This is where we have found God and this is where we share Him together. This is where we gather together for study and worship, as we are doing this morning. This is where we gather to have genuine fellowship together--to laugh together, love together, sing together, give thanks together. STUFF IN THE BULLETIN

I hope you will commit yourself to reaching out to people you know and inviting them to this place so that we might add to the church everyone who needs Christ. Not for our glory, but so that we can spread the love of Jesus Christ throughout this community and this world.

III

Let me ask you a question: what would you be willing to do to live forever? I'm not talking about eternal life after you die. I'm talking about avoiding death altogether.

Human beings have always searched for a way to cheat death. In Hollywood, Florida, there is a church called the Church of Perpetual Life, and its focus is on extending the healthy human lifespan on this earth for as long as possible. The church's motto is "Aging and death can be optional."

What a great marketing slogan for a society that is rapidly becoming godless! The Church of Perpetual Life's symbol is not a cross, but a phoenix, the bird in Greek mythology that rose from the dead and lives on perpetually. The church's leader, William Faloon, teaches his congregation about health and age reversal technologies. To support their ministry, the church sells dietary supplements and a magazine on preventing aging.

And the church supports a cryonics conference. Cryonics is the practice—completely unproven, by the way—of freezing a person's body and brain for decades, then unthawing them and bringing them back to life when medical science has found a cure for death. William Faloon hopes to build a

cryonics chamber in Texas that can hold 10,000 bodies, so its members can be brought back to life sometime in the future. (1)

But these folks are not alone! Silicon Valley in San Francisco is home to the biggest technology companies in the world—like Google, Apple, Facebook and Netflix. And Silicon Valley is also the epicenter of the obsession to live forever. There are companies there funded by some of our brightest technology entrepreneurs who are determinedly researching treatments to turn back the clock on our aging cells.

James Strole is the director of the Coalition of Radical Life Extension, an organization which brings together scientists and researchers of what they call “physical immortality.” He says, “There’s millions of people now who won’t see death if they choose.” (2)

What does it mean when some of the smartest and richest people in the country are investing so much time and money into not dying? They are assuredly motivated by a desire to help humankind. But is there not also a bit of narcissism and fear mixed into their efforts? If you’re young, healthy, smart or successful, why wouldn’t you want to live forever, especially if you could turn back the clock on your aging body?

There was an ancient Greek philosopher named Epicurus whose teachings have become very influential. In fact, you could say that our society has adopted Epicurus as our societal guru. Epicurus taught that the pursuit of happiness is the “sole purpose of life.” (3)

I’d say our society is determined to live out this philosophy. But then, how do we explain the rising rates of suicide and depression and loneliness in a society that is so focused on the pursuit of happiness?

In contrast, let’s look at the tiny kingdom of Bhutan, which is located between Tibet and India. In 1972, Bhutan’s king created a Gross National Happiness Index because he believed the happiness of his people was vitally important to their well-being. But the people of Bhutan view the path to happiness a little differently than we do. One of the secrets to happiness according to their philosophy is to think about your own death five times a day. (4) That seems like a gloomy way to live to me, but different strokes for different folks.

So which philosophy makes the most sense to you: living for your own pleasure or contemplating your own death five times a day—or, perhaps, neither? Keep that question in mind as we look at today’s Bible passage, John 10:1-10.

In this passage, Jesus seems to be fed up with the Pharisees, the religious scholars. He believes that their focus on rules and religious traditions is leading people away from God, and away from what really matters in life. And Jesus tells them a story of a good and caring shepherd who has to defend his sheep against thieves and robbers.

Verse 10 is the key verse we are focusing on today. Jesus says, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

In the New Testament, there are three Greek words that refer to life: *bios*, *psuche* and *zoe*. *Bios* refers to physical life. *Psuche* refers to the soul, the spiritual side of life. And *zoe* refers to eternal life, the life that flows from God alone. (5)

When Jesus says that he has come to give us life to the fullest, he uses the word *zoe*, eternal life. And he’s not talking about living forever on this planet. He’s talking about living life to the fullest in this world and then living life to the fullest in an even better world beyond the grave.

Eternal life is God's greatest gift. This life may offer us many pleasures and joys, but it still leaves us hungry for some greater meaning or purpose. That's our hunger to know God. That's part of our DNA. We were created in the image of God. All the qualities that make up God—holiness, completeness, life in its fullest sense—all these qualities are a part of our makeup. We were created to know God and to live at peace with God. We were created for purposeful work and creativity and relationships.

All the blessings we see in the first chapters of Genesis—that's the life we were made for. So when you get that empty ache inside that tells you this life is meaningless, please don't give up. Please don't try to numb the pain. Acknowledge that this life isn't your true purpose. And let that ache drive you to search for the God in whose image you were created.

Sara Miles was a chef and journalist living in San Francisco. She was an atheist and had no interest in religion or "religious nuts," as she put it. But one day, she wandered into a local Episcopal church while the priest was offering the Lord's Supper. Out of curiosity, Miles went up to the altar and received the bread and wine. And it fed a spiritual hunger in her that she didn't even know she had.

Since her encounter with Jesus Christ in participating in that sacred meal, Sara Miles has made a radical change in her life. For one thing, she has opened food pantries all over San Francisco. She's taking her faith to the streets, ministering to the poor and homeless with food and comfort and the hope she found when she found God. (6)

God did not intend for us to waste our lives chasing after lesser pleasures. Eternal life, both in this world and the world to come, is God's greatest gift to us. So what does a focus on eternal life do for us?

First of all, a focus on eternal life frees us from anxiety. Because eternal life will be life in God's presence, we know we can handle anything that comes our way. God created us in His image. Through Jesus Christ, God gave His life to remove any separation between us and Him. This loving God wants to spend eternity with us. In Psalm 16: 11, King David envisions living in God's presence. He describes it this way: "You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

Anxiety is rooted in fear. And fear drives us to compare ourselves with others and to compete for resources. Fear drives us to protect our turf and control our circumstances at all costs. At its root, fear causes us to put our needs first above all else and so we remain in a constant state of anxiety.

Author Max Lucado was talking to a native Hawaiian man who shared with him that Hawaiians refer to non-Hawaiians as "haole." Haole is a Hawaiian word for "no breath."

The nickname was created back in the 1820s when European immigrants came to the islands. The native Hawaiian man explained: "Our forefathers thought the settlers were always in a hurry to build plantations, harbors, and ranches. To the native Hawaiians they seemed short of breath." (7) Always in a hurry to build something bigger or acquire something better—does that sound like most of the people you know? We are the haole, the people with no breath.

In contrast to the haole, look at the life of the late Bob Pierce, the founder of the Christian relief organization World Vision. Millions of people all over the world have been fed and protected and educated and sheltered through World Vision. Pierce was once asked how he had created an organization with a worldwide impact. He said he had prayed, "O God, I give you the right to set the agenda for my life. From here on out, you're going to run the show. And you can change that agenda any time you want. But I pray that you will be pleased to use me for your glory in any way you see fit. Amen."

Bob Pierce's trust in God set him free from the anxieties of this life. And many thousands of people have been impacted by his decision to give his life to God's work. (8)

We exhaust ourselves chasing after comfort and success and validation. And every pleasure and accomplishment slips through our fingers when we die. What if we could let all that go and focus the best of our energy and time and resources on loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves? That's how a focus on eternal life sets us free from anxiety.

A focus on eternal life also frees us for generosity. We're not just talking about money here. We're talking about a generosity of spirit that is motivated by love. If God loved us enough to give us His Son that we might have eternal life, then won't that same God give us all that we need in this life? Knowing that our life belongs to a loving and generous God frees us to live with a generosity of spirit.

Pastor Adam Hamilton's daughter Danielle and her husband JT once worked at a hospice center for AIDS patients in South Africa. One day, the hospice staff decided to take the hospice residents out for ice cream. None of them made much money, and the residents were very poor, so the staff saved up their money for this very special treat. The closest restaurant that served ice cream was a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

A customer at the restaurant noticed the hospice group and asked about their purpose there. When Danielle told them about their ice cream trip, the man immediately offered to buy all of the hospice residents some fried chicken too. Even though the man didn't appear to have much money himself, he went up to the counter and ordered enough chicken for every resident. As Hamilton writes, "For most of the residents, this would be the last time they would eat fried chicken and ice cream, but in that moment there was great joy." (9)

Generosity is rooted in faith and it overflows in joy. Who doesn't want more joy in this life? This is the kind of life God created you to live. But joy doesn't come from winning the biggest chunk of cheese in the rat race. Joy comes from focusing on the things that are important to God. A focus on eternal life frees us from anxiety and frees us for generosity.

When we look at the life of Jesus, we don't have to question God's existence and His purposes anymore. God's purpose is for you to live eternally in God's presence, where there is peace and joy and rest from all forms of anxiety and want. That's what Jesus lived for and died for. Don't you want to know there is something worth living for and dying for that is greater than this ordinary life? That "something" can only be found in giving your life over to Jesus and living in his promise of eternal life.

1. "The transhumanists who want to live forever" by Antonio Regalado MIT Technology Review, Aug 16, 2019, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/614078/transhumanists-live-forever/>.

2. "Is Silicon Valley's quest for immortality a fate worse than death?" by Adam Gabbatt, The Guardian, Feb. 23, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/feb/22/silicon-valley-immortality-blood-infusion-gene-therapy>.

3. Harari, Yuval Noah. Homo Deus (p. 30). Harper. Kindle Edition.

4. Quartz Obsession, March 26, 2019.

5. "Three Greek Words in the New Testament for Life, and How They Apply to Us," <https://blog.biblesforamerica.org/greek-words-for>

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Once upon a time, a great and loving king ruled over a vast territory. There was something very strange about this kingdom, however. Everything was the same. The people ate the same food, drank the same drink, wore the same clothes, and lived in the same type of homes. The people even did all the same work. There was another oddity about this place. Everything was gray - the food, the drink, the clothes, the houses; there were no other colors.

One day, a majestic and very beautiful bird flew from the west into a small village that lay a great distance from the capital city. The bird deposited a yellow egg and flew off. The people were fascinated with their new possession since they had never seen anything but gray. They played with the egg and poked it. In the process the egg broke. Inside was a yellow powder. Anything that came in contact with the powder instantly turned yellow. At the outset, a few peoples' clothes and some other objects turned yellow, but the people were soon so struck with their new discovery that the whole village was "painted" yellow. The next day, the same bird flew from the west and deposited a blue egg in another small village. It did not take long before everything in this village was blue. This same scenario repeated itself on seven consecutive days, as the majestic bird deposited seven different colored eggs in seven villages.

The great king in the capital city, where all was still gray, heard about these strange events and wondered what the sign might mean. He called in his royal councilors and advisors and asked them if anything like this had happened in the past. They checked the ancient manuscripts and discovered that many generations ago the kingdom was ruled by a philosopher king. At the time there was much dissension, strife, and conflict in the kingdom. It was further discovered that the source of this dissension came about from the differences that existed among the people. The king, who wanted peace, believed that the only way to restore harmony was to eliminate all differences among the people. This is why all the people did the same things and all was gray.

The present king was worried that the various colors in the villages would again lead to dissension and strife. Thus, he ordered the royal archers to locate the majestic bird and slay it. The archers found the bird and their arrows were sent straight and true, but they had no effect on the bird which simply flew away. If the bird could not be stopped then the people must be, thought the king. Thus, he ordered the people to remove all the colors and return to gray. But the people, who were enamored with the new colors in their lives, refused to obey the king's order. Dissension, strife, and conflict ensued - the very things the king was trying to prevent.

The king was unsure as to what to do, until one day the beautiful majestic bird flew into the royal palace and deposited seven different colored eggs. The king was frustrated and angry and in a fit of rage he hurled the eggs in all different directions. They burst into an array of color. The beauty was so great that the king, in a moment of inspiration, knew precisely what he needed to do. He now realized that the bird was a sign that change was needed, but he had ignored the sign. Thus, the king ordered that all the people must have all the colors. Again there were no differences and dissension, strife, and conflict ceased. All the people lived happily ever after.¹

John Aurelio's story "Colors" speaks of how a king was given a choice - follow the sign of God or ignore the sign and go your own way. His failure to heed the sign almost brought disaster for him and his kingdom. Jesus, in today's gospel, presents us with a choice - will we enter life through him, the gatekeeper, or seek another road. The choice is ours! John's Gospel, which we know is filled with powerful images, presents us with one of the most significant in our reading today. Jesus describes himself as the gate through which all must pass who seek God and eternal life. The Lord is very clear, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (10:9). Jesus tells his disciples that there are many ways to enter, that is to live one's life, but only those who hear the voice of the gatekeeper will discover, follow, and hold to the correct path. All who

seek to find another route are described as "thieves and bandits" who have come to steal and kill. Jesus, however, has come to give abundant life to those who follow him.

The imagery of this passage provides two important and distinct messages. First, we hear a polemical warning by Jesus against all who seek to call the sheep, that is God's people, away from the only true road, namely through the sheepgate. In branding such people as criminals, Jesus is clearly suggesting that the teachings and the path that he offers must be followed if one desires to find God's presence at the end of life. So many false prophets are present in society and they come in various forms. Some of these "teachers" are prognosticators of doom, those who forecast only the worst and seemingly can never find anything in their lives or that of society to celebrate. These people have given up hope, have "thrown in the towel" and surrendered to the difficulties and obstacles of life. Other false prophets take the opposite road and declare that there are no problems and that we must maintain the status quo at all costs. Like the proverbial ostrich that hides its head in the sand, these "prophets" choose to look the other way and ignore the plight of those less fortunate, including the poor, the sick, and those who live on the margins of our society. There are those teachers, as well, who suggest that all the answers to life's questions and problems can be found in the world and all that it has to offer. The allure of power, wealth, and prestige, the three great sins of human nature, is strong and many preach this as the message of salvation. Such prophets are the thieves and bandits to whom Jesus refers in his metaphor. In many ways all are prophets of doom who insist that God should play no role in our world or our lives.

In striking contrast to this first message, is Jesus' insistence that there must be a strong bond between the sheep, God's people, and the gatekeeper, Jesus. This missive of hope is integral to the whole mission of Christ, and states that all who follow him faithfully will never see death, but rather will enjoy the eternal life which is God's gift to all who believe. We must listen to the voice of the true shepherd, the gatekeeper, amidst the noise of many false prophets. This is often a difficult task, but if we keep our attention fixed on Christ, then we will not be swayed by the errant messages that seem to surround us. Christ is the light at the end of the dark tunnel; we must persevere and diligently hold fast to the road and not seek detours or shortcuts. There is one, and only one, way to find life and that is through Jesus, the gatekeeper.

Today's society presents us with many choices and possibilities that only seem to grow more numerous with time and the "advance" of culture. They say that "variety is the spice of life" and I suspect it is true. Yet, the many choices that stand before us can be confusing. We need to learn how to wisely use the gift of free will, our ability to choose. This gift, if used constructively, can provide much good for our world, but if abused it can create untold grief.

Wisdom dictates that in order to use our gift of free will wisely, we must ask ourselves some important questions concerning how well we follow Jesus, the shepherd and gatekeeper, in the decisions we make. What are the criteria that we use to make the important decisions of our lives? Do we seek out family and friends, colleagues and associates? What place does God have in our decision making process? What responsibility do we feel for those God has entrusted to us? Young people, students, or subordinates at work all look to elders and superiors to lead them. By following our lead will people find the pasture of life or are we leading people astray by the conduct of our lives? What choices have we made lately? Were they helpful and did they aid us along the path of life or were they destructive? If they were harmful, did we have the courage to change and make a better choice? When we make decisions are they based solely on our needs and wants or do we consider the desires of others? If we find ourselves in positions of authority, do we make choices that are beneficial to all or are we selfish in our choices? Jesus' life demonstrates that suffering is part of the Christian life. Are we willing to make the decision that may cause suffering because it is the right choice, or do we shy away because we are afraid to endure a crisis for the sake of Christ's name?

All of these ideas concerning decisions beg one more important and pertinent question - why does the world suffer? Why do pain, problems, and suffering exist in such abundance? We all believe that God is all good, all love, full of compassion, and all powerful. This is how we define God and we believe this is true. Thus, the question bears repeating, why does our world suffer? Why do wars exist and people die in innocence? Why do people in positions of public trust commit acts that cause others not only to lose faith in the individual, but in the system as well? Why do people fight one another when the only difference between them is the color of their skin, their political preference, or religious belief?

The basic answer to these challenging questions is personal choice, our free will to say, "Yes" or "No," to God at any time in any way. Soren Kierkegaard, the famous nineteenth-century existentialist philosopher and theologian, once wrote, "Faith is a matter of choice, our personal decision in finding God." This personal decision, our free will, is why the world suffers. It is free will that allows the drunk to drive and kill others. It is free will that allows people in public service to break the law and, thus, lower the integrity of the system. It is free will that places certain members and groups in society on the fringe and does not allow them to participate. Free will moves us closer to or further from God. As Kierkegaard wrote, it is our decision; faith is our choice.

Jesus, the gate that leads to life, invites us to follow him to his pasture. Our great gift of free will allows us to say, "Yes" or "No," to God. God loves us so much, that we were given the option whether or not we wish to follow the Lord. In some ways it might be easier if we were animals that relied totally on instinct. We would then be programmed to follow the Lord and find eternal life. God, however, believes that the choice must be ours. God wants us to give our daily ascent to his invitation. Many will present themselves along the way as the gate we should employ. We must find our way through the maze of false teachers, hopeless situations, and problematic circumstances to find Jesus and the true path to God which he provides. The choice is ours! Jesus put it well in Matthew's Gospel (7:13-14): "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."