

## *“Hunting the Divine Rabbit.”*

We like labeling things. And people. And days, like today. Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday, because of what we’ve heard in today’s gospel reading and psalm. In our gospel reading, Jesus called himself the Good Shepherd. And the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd— that label, that metaphor— has inspired song writers and painters for thousands of years. In fact, some of the most popular drawings of Jesus are those that depict him as a shepherd, carrying home the lost sheep upon his shoulders.

And, make no mistake about it, labels play an important role, not only in the life of the wider Church, but also for individual Christians, because they help us relate to God. Labels make God seem more understandable, and more approachable. However, the labels we use to describe God, are like a good suit of clothes: one size does not fit all. And the following fable, I think, really illustrates this point:

A long, long time ago, in a small valley community far, far away, there was a monastery led by a wise abbot.

One afternoon a young monk came to the abbot and asked him, “Why is it that some men come to our community, stay for a while, do all the things that we do, but then leave? And yet, others will come to our community, do all the things that we do, and then stay for the rest of their lives. In other words, why do some men stay, and others leave?”

After thinking for a few moments, the Abbot responded to the young monk’s question by telling him this story:

“Not too long ago, I was sitting outside and enjoying the afternoon sun. As is often the case, my dog was curled up at my feet.

As the two of us sat there in silence, a rabbit suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and, just as quickly, scurried off; but not before my dog saw it, and took up the chase. Pretty soon,

my dog was out of sight, and all I could hear was the sound of his barking.

Not long after, other dogs in the area, hearing my dog's barking, also took up the chase. And it wasn't long before our valley was filled with the sound of many dogs barking. Eventually, after a while, all of the dogs returned to their homes. That is, except for my dog; my dog did not return."

Clearly, the abbot was finished talking, but the novice was not satisfied. "I asked you an important question, and you tell me a silly story?" The abbot said to the novice, "After hearing my story, you should have asked me, 'Why did all the other dogs come back, and only my dog stay away?'" The novice was not happy with the way this conversation was going, but he still needed an answer. "Alright, abbot," the novice said, "please tell me, why did all of the other dogs come back and only your dog stay away?" The abbot smiled and answered him: "The answer is quite simple: Only my dog actually saw the rabbit."

And the moral of the Abbot's story is this: too often, in our spiritual journey, we chase the sound of the other dog's bark, and not the rabbit itself. That is, the labels we sometimes use to understand God, and to relate to God, while helpful to us, may not necessarily be helpful to others. Let me give you some examples.

For centuries, theologians have found various ways to label God. They came up with labels like Omnipotent (all-powerful), Omnipresent (present everywhere), and Omniscient (all-knowing). They're good labels, but they tend to stimulate the intellect rather than the heartstrings. That is, they're fine if all you want to know more about God, but it's hard to base a personal relationship on labels like these.

Another label for God, some of you might have seen on bumper stickers: "God is my copilot." This is a better label, but if you're not a pilot it may lose a lot in the translation.

Our psalm this morning described God as our shepherd. That's not a bad image either, since most of us have seen pictures of shepherds tending their flocks of sheep. But, not being sheep, or even a shepherd, that image, that label, can still leave us needing more.

In various places in the gospels, Jesus described himself as “the way, the truth, and the life,” as “the door,” and as “the gate.” All good images, especially if you live in the first century, but not very inviting to me on a personal level.

In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus described God as our Father, our Abba; literally, our Daddy. Now, that’s a pretty good image, because everyone has a father, and some of us are fathers. But for some people, it can still be the chasing after another dog’s bark. If you came from a family where the father was absent, or unloving, or abusive, then the image of God as Father is not a good one.

However, in the Middle Ages, an interesting thing happened: some Christians began experimenting with an entirely new (for Christians, that is) label for God. Saint Anselm, who was the Archbishopric of Canterbury starting in 1093 ce, wrote these words:

“Jesus, as a mother you gather your people to you.  
You are gentle with us as a mother with her children.”

And Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century nun and mystic, wrote this:

“Jesus is our true mother,  
the protector of the love which knows no end.  
All the love of offering  
and sacrifice of beloved motherhood  
are in Christ our Beloved.”

Even though Anselm and Julian belonged to a time very different from our own, they still managed to create a surprisingly modern-sounding description of God in Christ. And I really wonder what Anselm’s mother, and Julian’s mother were like. They must have been remarkable women, that , years later, their children would come to the conclusion that the God they knew personally and worshiped and loved was very much like their mothers.

I guess that my point is that, when we’re trying to relate to God, we need to find a label (or image or metaphor) that works best for us. But we need to keep in mind, that every image or label for God that we can think of may have both positive and negative aspects. And, in our search for a label that helps us enter into a relationship with God, we have to try each one on “for size,” and see which fits us best.

Now, two final thoughts come to mind. The first is that the labels we attach to God— the images we use, the metaphors we employ— not only help us to understand God, and help us to relate to God in ways that are life-giving, but they also help us understand how we are to relate to each other. That is, the way we understand how God relates to us, is usually the way we are to supposed relate to each other. In other words, whatever it is that you expect from God, whatever it is that you look for from God, is the very thing you need to be offering to the people around you.

The second thought is more a word of caution: the labels we use to describe God are, as I said before, like a good suit of clothes; that is, one size does not fit all. The fact is that the label for God that works for me, may not be the label that works for someone else. Nor is my label the best label, nor the only one. In fact, if you find yourself in a faith community where everyone is forced to adopt the exact same label for God, my advise to you is this: “Don’t drink the Kool-Aid.” At the very least, in such a community, what you will likely find are people who are chasing the sound of another dog’s barking.

In the end, we like to label things and people. Even God. And on this day which has come to be known as Good Shepherd Sunday, we are reminded that the image of God as our father or our mother, or as our shepherd or our co-pilot, are useful in helping us to understand that God is someone with whom we can enter into a personal relationship. These images are good in that they make God seem more approachable, and less threatening.

But we also need to remember the story of the abbot and his. In looking for labels to describe God— in looking for images, metaphors, and the like— we need to make sure that we’re actually chasing after the rabbit itself, and not simply chasing after the sound of another dog’s barking.

Let us pray: Lord God, grant us grace to desire you with our whole heart; so that, in desiring you, we may seek and find you; so that, finding you, we may be for others that which you have been for us; for the sake of your son, our savior, friend, shepherd and brother, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.