

When you look at the totality of Sacred Scripture, and read them with your heart open to God you have to come to the conclusion that first and foremost the entire bible is a love story. Even when God punished the Hebrew people for their offenses in the Old Testament, when they came back to him in prayer and fasting he relented in his punishment and he never withdrew his love.

All of the dire warnings about hell in the New Testament are to warn us and keep us away from something that will do us harm, much like when we spank a toddler's hand when they reach for the hot stove. The discipline hurts for a moment, but we learn from it and it doesn't hurt and damage us like touching the hot stove. The warnings seem stern, but they are made out of love.

The parable of the Good Shepherd is a love story. Not the gushy, mushy romance type of love story where love is used as an adjective, a descriptive term; it is a love story where love is used as a verb, a word that describes and requires action.

Sheep stink, in fact they reek. Think old sweaty wet wool horse blanket with some spoiled cooking oil mixed in. There are times when they are cute, but most of the time they are a bit of a pain. If they can find a way to get lost, tangled in a thicket, fall into a hole they will do it. They mill around making noise unless they are sleeping or eating. They poop everywhere.

Left to our own devices, we aren't much different from the sheep. We have our moments, but we are a pain. Spiritually, unless we have just left Reconciliation we have a bit of an odor, and without regular Reconciliation, it soon becomes an O-Deer! If there is a way to get into trouble, we are all about it! We all have our favorite sins and seem to spend time looking for new sins to try out on a daily basis. We get lost, we mill around in circles and when someone takes the lead, a lot of the time we don't even ask where they are going, we just follow along.

Sometimes we think that all of the secular sheep in the lead are actually shepherds. We listen to their voice and we are lead down a path to destruction. We stumble from false shepherd, to false shepherd, from problem to mess to disaster until we wake up and hear the voice of the one true shepherd, the one shepherd who truly loves us, Jesus Christ.

The Good Shepherd takes action every day to prove that he loves us. Most of the time we don't even recognize the gifts of his love. We credit ourselves for the food on our table, the clothing on our bodies and the roofs over our heads instead of recognizing that all we are and all we have are gifts from God. Then there are the gifts we do recognize, his Church, the Sacraments, the gift of Jesus becoming one with us in a union more intimate than that of a husband and wife in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

We have established that the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ loves us, but how do we grow to love him? Let's look at the example of our own lives. A guy sees a girl and decides that he would like to get to know her better. They start a conversation and agree to a date. After the date the guy decides that that was enjoyable and he would like to do that again. The girl comes to the same conclusion. The cycle repeats itself until they are spending almost all of their free time together, each telling themselves that they enjoyed their last encounter. Finally one of them confesses that they love the other and in the mutual gush of emotion they end up getting married.

We are people. We don't decide on love based on a chemical reaction or an instinctual response. We use some version of reason. In the case of love, we literally talk ourselves into loving our spouse. I know that it is harder to believe that my wife talked herself into loving me than the fact that I talked myself into loving her, but that is what happened.

How do we maintain our loving relationship? First is action. Just as God takes action every day to ensure our well being, we need

to do the same for our spouse. In addition, we have to continue to talk ourselves into being in love. That is why we should never miss an opportunity to tell our spouses that we love them. Think it through; when you tell your spouse 'I love you', you have to think it, you have to speak or write it, and the first person to hear or read it is you. So for every time you tell your spouse that you love them, you tell yourself 3 times that you love them.

Sacred Scripture is where we get to know God; prayer is how we talk ourselves into loving God. Prayer starts with simple repetition, telling God that we love him in all of the different and wonderful ways given to us by our Church. At some point we leave the formal prayer and have a conversation with God. With enough love on our part and the gift of the Holy Spirit some can enter into contemplation about God.

As a natural consequence, when we love someone we want to be with them, to be in their physical presence, too see them face-to-face. Archbishop Fulton Sheen spent an hour a day in the presence of the Eucharist, every day of his life beginning on the day of his ordination. During his hour, he always took a few moments to read the bible.

Everyone in the parish is welcome to spend time in Our Lord's presence whenever there is someone in the office to open the door. We have Eucharistic Adoration every first Friday through Saturday morning. What a wonderful opportunity to bring your Bible and encounter Jesus in the Eucharist and in scripture; and while you are here, to take some time for that quiet conversation.

Jesus the Good Shepherd laid down his life for us. We need to move past the routine and experience the love story in our own lives. We need to fall in love once again with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.