4th Sunday of Easter, 2009

Merlin Harn and his wife were driving by a railroad track in Menasha, Wisconsin, last year when they saw a 3-year-old boy wandering alone on the tracks. As a train rushed toward the boy, the crossing lights and bells went off. Harn ran to the child, grabbed him under the arms and carried him to safety just seconds before the oncoming train passed them with its emergency brake screeching.

Harn was among 19 people who were awarded Carnegie medals last December for their courage. Like good shepherds, they all risked their lives in caring for the flock. Of the 19, three died while trying to rescue others from fires, drowning and other dangers.

In the gospel just proclaimed, Jesus tells his followers: "I am the good shepherd who is willing to die for the sheep. And Jesus proved it in his dying for us. Not only that he is willing to rise and be with us always to shepherd us through the dark valleys that we encounter in our living.

By the time John's gospel is proclaimed the early Christian community can identify with the sheep. They have been tossed out of the synagogue and in many instances ostracized from the communities in which they lived. They became the new Samaritans. They are vulnerable.

Ethnologists (scientists who study animal behavior) tell us that dogs and sheep were two of the first kings of animals to be domesticated. This occurred thousands of years ago in the case of sheep. Sheep have lost any possibility for survival out in the wild. They have no natural defenses. They are vulnerable.

John also emphasizes in his story that Jesus knows the sheep. Because he knows them, he is even more willing to die for them. For Jesus, the sheep is everybody, regardless of denomination. As followers of Jesus we are called to know Jesus through our reflection and prayer, and we are called to help Jesus, imitate Jesus in the job of shepherding everyone, regardless of religion, race, creed, status, etc. Jesus cares about everyone, so must we.

Most of us may not be able to do something as dramatic as Merlin Harn did, but we are all called to be on the lookout to know, and care about, and save as many folks as we can. The economic depression we are in is like a cloud over all of us. We are involved in a couple of wars. There are many more happening in our world. Swine flu is on our minds as we gather today, and the drug wars in Mexico are also played out in the violence on our city streets. There are many dangers out there.

But we also have, because of those dangers, an unprecedented chance to be a shepherd, to lay down our lives, to wash the feet of others, to serve others with our lives as Jesus did. I was talking to a woman who mentioned how she works with students in a local school. Her volunteer work made a big difference in her lives and in the lives of the students. She saw it as ministry.

Peter deflects any praise for healing a cripple to Jesus. It is Jesus who empowers him and the early Christian community to make a difference. Jesus is risen and among them. The first letter of John reminds us that we are all God's children. The question for each of us is "What can I do to continue the work of Jesus in my own life for those I know and those I don't?"

It is a question of life and death for all of us. And so we ask the Good Shepherd to be like him in laying down our own lives in service. Thanks be to God!