

Jesus contrasts the Good Shepherd with bad shepherds--or good leaders with bad ones. Now we've all had bad leaders in our lives, so to help zero in on the experience, let me tell you a story about a man who had five very bad leaders to put up with.

The man was Athanasius. He lived in the fourth century and attended the Council of Nicaea, where they wrote the Nicene Creed that we still recite every Sunday at St. Regis and at every Catholic Church in the world. Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria in northern Africa and fought a heresy called Arianism.

While he was bishop he outlived five emperors and they were the real problem. The first was Constantine, who normally gets good press because he ended the persecutions and made Christianity a state religion. But the heretics impeached Athanasius and Constantine let him be banished to Western Europe.

When Constantine died, his empire went to his three sons, Constantine II, Constantius, and Constans. (They weren't real original with names back then.) Constantine II brought Athanasius back home, but the heretics came after him again and he had to go up to Rome to defend himself before the Pope. A second time the emperor did nothing.

Athanasius returned, but the new emperor, Constantius, tried him again and exiled him to Egypt. When Constantius died, another new emperor, Julian, let Athanasius return. But only for a few months. Then Julian banished him again up the Nile and deeper into Africa. When Julian died, Athanasius returned to Alexandria, and the fifth emperor, Valens, threw him out. Eventually he got home.

He was exiled 5 times by different emperors, spending 17 years away from his diocese. He lived the last seven years of his life happily as bishop of Alexandria, and he's canonized a saint today. We just had his feast last week.

This is an involved story to say that sometimes people have to endure bad leadership. You may have had a boss you couldn't stand, or maybe your parents hurt you in a way you've never forgiven. Many priests and nuns have hurt Catholics who then walked out the church door and never came back again. There are bad shepherds in every profession, in every vocation. They are thieves and marauders who enter the sheepfold to help themselves, not to help the sheep.

And you know something else? We often think God is a bad leader. God leads us out of the sheepfold and right into a hungry pack of wolves and we say, "Hold on, here. Where's this Good Shepherd?" It's absurd, of course, that God would be selfish, but that's how it feels.

My brothers and sisters, we each have opportunities to be a shepherd--as leader, boss, parent, best friend, or pet owner. In every instance the choice is ours, to be shepherd or to be thief. We can figure out which we are with one question: Am I helping myself or am I helping the sheep?