

“Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together”. Amen

The text for our meditation is taken from the Gospel of John, which I read before. Let us pray: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Amen

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One of the most familiar pictures the Bible uses to teach us about our relationship to God is that of a shepherd and his sheep. It has its roots deep in the Old Testament. In the Introit of today, which is Psalm 23, the author declares, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Here the psalmist describes his Lord as a good shepherd who takes care of his faithful believers who are his sheep. Jesus uses this same picture in the Gospel for this Fourth Sunday of Easter when He says, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). His listeners knew that a real shepherd is concerned first and foremost with the welfare of his flock. He would provide it the necessities of life such as food and drink. When a wild animal attacks, he would risk his life for the sheep. He would put his own life in jeopardy to protect his flock.

But, my dear friends in Christ, Jesus is doing much more than telling nice stories about heroic shepherds who rescue lovable little lambs from the mouths of hungry lions. He is claiming us as His own. He is saying, “I am the Lord to whom the psalmist looked in all his needs. I am the One who leads and provides. I am the One who goes with you through the valley of the shadow of death. I prepare a banquet table before you in the presence of your enemies. I fill your life with goodness and mercy and lead you to dwell in my house forever.” Jesus says: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He sees what He will do so that His flock, you and I, may live for Him now and with Him forever. The lessons of Lent and Easter are still fresh in our minds. We know how He fulfilled this prophecy with His death on Calvary.

In the Gospel of today He says about His life: “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again.” We believe that this claim was validated with His glorious resurrection from the dead. We accept His claim to be the psalmist’s Lord—and yours and mine. We confess with Peter in the first lesson, “There is salvation in no one else” (Acts 4:12)

Our problem is that we reject that claim. It is not by accident that the Lord compares us to sheep. “I am the good shepherd and know my own sheep.” Indeed He knows sheep; we are like sheep. There is a story about sheep on a farm. A man there raised a small flock of sheep more as a hobby than as a serious sheep farmer. The little flock grew to about thirty in number - when it was attacked by packs of roving dogs. Instead of staying together or fleeing to the shelter of the barnyard, they panicked and scattered in every direction. The fast dogs outran them and destroyed them, one by one.

Jesus knows us with our weaknesses and fears. He knows how the human family still loves to wander and stray. And He wants us to be one flock gathered around Him. He wants to be the Lord of our life, but what happens? We have our own wills. We decide to do what we please without regard for the Lord’s will or the consequences of our actions. Some of us are carried away by our greed and selfishness; sometimes we are ruined by our lusts and desires. It may be our temper or lack of self-control which leads us to deny His claim. Each of us must confess with Isaiah that in some way, we are the ones who strayed away like sheep.

But Jesus calls us back. Jesus told the story of the shepherd who brought His flock of one hundred sheep into shelter out of the storm on the mountain. He counted them and found one missing. He left the ninety-nine and went out after the one sheep lost in the night and the storm. When He found the lost sheep, he picked him up, brought him home, and rejoiced with his neighbors.

So also the Good Shepherd will not let us go. He calls us back through the distress of our conscience and the witness of the church. He picks us up in his grace and love. He forgives us all our sins. And He brings us back home, home to himself and His love. But for a purpose. When the risen Lord stood with His disciples in the Upper Room the week after the first Easter, He said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). He sends us out to continue the work which He began. He asks us to follow His example of shepherding so that His blessings are taken to others.

And Jesus, first, points to a negative example, that of the hired man. The hired man is not a true shepherd. He represents the kind of life which seeks to use Jesus and His church. He is content to stop with the picture of the Good Shepherd as a picture of consolation which permits him to cuddle safely in the Lord's arms. This is the kind of life which rejoices at the story of the resurrection, but never "goes and tells." It is a life which "uses" the church for the socially accepted traditions of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and funerals, but carefully avoids commitment or responsibility for the life of the parish community.

It is a life which faults the establishment for its failures or the youth for its rebellions, but fails to offer its love, its loyalty, or even sympathetic understanding. The church today is in trouble—as much as any flock of sheep which is being attacked by wolves. A hired man will run when He sees the wolf coming and will leave the sheep, for they are not his and he is not their shepherd. The hired man runs because he is a hired man and has no real concern for the sheep. The church will not be a blessing to those who use it for what they can get out of it. Nor will they be a blessing to the church, to the flock of the Good Shepherd.

In contrast to the negative example of the hired man, the Lord Jesus calls our attention to Himself as the Good Shepherd. Even as the Father sent Him to lay down His life for the sheep, so He aids us to follow that example. He calls us to commit ourselves to the task of shepherding one another. Today, as always, the flock is in danger of letting the weaker one wander away. There exists in every age the danger that the flock may be divided by the wolves of dissension and distrust, the body of Christ, His church, divided into many denominations. Indeed church bodies and congregations frequently find themselves on the verge of division over one issue or another.

In such a time as this it is necessary for everyone who calls Jesus His Good Shepherd to follow the example of the Master: to lay down personal preferences and prejudices for the sake of the unity of the flock. This will mean the kind of struggle which the Good Shepherd experienced in Gethsemane. It means that we resolve to do, not what we want, but what must be done for the sake of the kingdom. It is our risen Lord who has shown us that when we lay down our lives for others, He gives them back to us. He enables us to rise above our weaknesses as we seek to be shepherds of each other.

The first opportunity which most of us have to be shepherds to each other is in the setting of the family. There is a motto suggested for Christian fathers. It said, "The best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother." We do most of our learning by personal experience rather than by reading books or listening to pious lectures and sermons. This is especially true of attitudes and values.

As children of God see our response to the people around us—the way we treat our spouses, our neighbors, the clerks at the store; the way we talk about our family, friends, and fellow church members—they are being taught how to respond to people around them. I notice, for example, that there is nothing which makes children so angry as the anger toward them. I suspect they are learning from their fathers. When children see what is important to their parents and elders, they set their own values along the same lines. Whether husband or wife, parent or child, brother or sister, our first opportunities to follow the example of the Good Shepherd are usually in the home.

Jesus says in v. 16, “I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). These words do not let us snuggle quietly like a lamb in the shepherd’s arms on a cold night. The reason He has called us is to reach out to others who are not yet a part of His flock, who are not yet in His fold. We have referred to the shepherd who left the ninety-nine in the fold to go out after the lost one. So this gospel is a missionary and evangelistic text.

The Good Shepherd leads us out of our family and congregation, out of our city and synod into the world which He came to claim for himself. The path is not an easy one. It is a path which leads to criticism when we seek to stand up for what our Good Shepherd taught. It is not easy to live the kind of life demonstrated by the Good Shepherd in a world which is hostile to Him and to His ways.

But the Good Shepherd leads us out so He can lead others in. The wonderful thing is that the Good Shepherd has not only left us a path to follow; He goes with us at our side. He is ready to help and to lead. A small boy once followed his father around the barnyard as he did the chores. It was winter and the yard was covered with a deep blanket of snow. The little boy wandered around and around, back and forth, through the deep snow, until he wore himself out. He was unable to go any further. “I cannot walk anymore,” he said to his father. His father replied, “Follow my steps.” The boy followed his father’s steps. The path was broken for him and he was able to follow easily.

My friends, following the steps of Jesus, being shepherds to each other in our families and in our congregation, going out into the world after the other sheep, is much more difficult than following someone through deep snow. But of this we can be sure: no matter what struggle or challenge we may face, Jesus has already gone ahead to make a path for us. He is the Good Shepherd who leads us, lifts us up when we fall, and carries us when we cannot go on. He claims us and He calls us. He will see us through until we see His word fulfilled, “There will be one flock, one shepherd.”

It is this claim and call which He seals to us again this morning in His Holy Supper. It is a foretaste of the celebration which He will set before us then. And He lets us begin to enjoy it now. Amen

“The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keeps your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour”. Amen