

The flesh-and-blood-reality of the image of 'Good Shepherd'
John 10:22-30
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 12, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, certainly our gospel reading with those beloved words, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"... but, I'd also like to consider this morning how those words tie in to the words Jesus spoke immediately after last week's text, when he told Peter, "Feed my sheep."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The image of the sheep and their good shepherd... is there any more comforting image in all of Scripture? Oh sure, someone could try to be a purist and say, "Jesus on the cross is a more comforting image!", but the two are not opposed to one another or in competition with one another... they both proclaim the same Christ, except that the one – Jesus on the cross – proclaims a historical truth, whereas the image of the Good Shepherd is a picture of a doctrinal teaching. That's what is meant when we say that that image, that illustration of Christ's relationship with His Church is perhaps the most comforting portrayal within the Scriptures.

Of course, if we listen to the Scriptures closely, Christ does not speak of the image as if it has no flesh and bones. He speaks of it as a daily life reality. In our text he says to the Jews, "You do not believe because you are not part of my flock." That's a flesh-and-blood flock, isn't it?... not a nameless, faceless idea of the Church,

but a body of believers and followers of Jesus whom he knows and loves. And that flesh-and-blood, true life flock includes you! Jesus knows you and he thinks of *you* when He speaks of his flock.

Thus, how much more comfort to hear him say (in flesh-and-blood reality), “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” That’s not just theoretical! Put *that* in daily life reality and it *is* comforting! Comforting that you don’t even have to apply that to yourself because *he* applies it to you; he speaks of *you* with those words. He has *you* in mind when he speaks so lovingly of his sheep and so assertively of his care for you... his care of you in present tense reality – “My sheep *hear* my voice (present), and I *know* them (present), and they *follow me* (present)” – present tense reality with eternal and never-ending benefit: “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hands.” So comforting!

And we need that comfort in daily life when the world weighs on us, when the sins of others and our own sins burden us. We need that comfort not to simply be a *picture* or *image* of comfort, but true flesh-and-blood comfort, once sealed in flesh-and-blood laying down of the Shepherd’s life for the sheep, and distributed in flesh-and-blood reality for the Shepherd’s ongoing care of his sheep.

And Christ *knows* we need it (which is comforting in and of itself) – that he knows what daily life in this world is like for us

sinners, how easily we are harmed, how easily we are burdened, how easily we would go astray and not follow – he knows that so intimately that he charged his pastors with not just an *image* of a shepherd’s care, but true shepherding care, when he told Peter how it would be carried out in flesh-and-blood reality: “Feed my sheep.”

Think of that, he wasn’t just trying to paint pleasant pictures for Peter; he was instructing and charging him in that moment what it would mean to care for the people of God, so that they would learn of their Good Shepherd: “feed my sheep.” In fact, did Christ not tie that command to Peter’s love for *him*: “Peter, do you love me?” “You know that I do, Lord.” “Then, feed my sheep.” In short, he says to the undershepherds, “If you love the Good Shepherd, then feed my sheep, for whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.” What comfort for the sheep, that Christ would tie their care to the undershepherd’s service to *Him*, so that no undershepherd can selfishly say, “Oh, I love *Jesus*, so why put energy into caring for *those Christians* as long as they pay me,” because those Christians, every single one of them, is worth everything to Christ, the Good Shepherd. So, the command comes to Peter and to the officeholders of the Holy Ministry, “Feed my sheep.” That’s the daily-life reality of how it plays out that “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.”

As comforting as it is, it also expresses how vulnerable and needy we sheep are. Is there any word other than ‘feed’ that could

have expressed how daily- and forever- dependent we are upon the sustenance of Christ through the means of grace stewarded by the undershepherds. What else could he have said? *“Clothe my sheep”*? As if, as long as you are warm and snug in baptismal garments, you can otherwise take care of yourself? *“House my sheep”*? As if, as long as you have a place to come to on a Sunday, you can otherwise live your life without need of Christ? *“Watch my sheep”*? As if, as long as the under-shepherd sees you on the membership rolls and occasionally checks in on you and sends you an e-mail or gives you a phone call, you can otherwise wander in the vast grasslands of this world by yourself? What of *“Guide my sheep”*? As if, as long as the pastor proclaims to you the Law and keeps you in good moral behavior, you will walk yourself to the gates of the pastures of heaven?

Instead, Jesus says, *“Feed my sheep.”* There’s nothing more vulnerable and needy than being fed. What person is more vulnerable in life than a nursing infant? What person is more dependent than the aged who cannot feed himself or swallow on his own? How often it happens that the beggar will refuse a meal, but take a dollar to buy the smallest snack so as to feel the self-worth of providing his own good? And yet, Jesus speaks of our utter need for his sustenance when he tells Peter, *“Feed my sheep.”*

Is there any denying the flesh-and-blood reality of our never-ending dependence on Christ? Will we pridefully attempt to

reinterpret into this a freedom *from* him, an empowerment to be our own sheep, to be our own shepherd, a self-righteousness and self-sustenance to safely maneuver the dangers of this world and even the valley of the shadow of death?

What a mirage, what self-deception, what self-idolization, what foolishness... to look in the mirror and pretend that our thick wool is actually a shepherd's cloak and our stubby hooves could grip firmly a shepherd's rod and staff.

And, it's this image – a sheep trying to play the role of the shepherd – that should not only humble the flock, but also comfort them as they might warily think of the undershepherd, to whom Christ does *not* say, “Feed *your* sheep,” or “Feed the sheep I have *given* you.” That sheep who wears the shepherd's cloak does so not by self-achievement, nor as a hireling, but only as assigned by and accountable to Christ. “Feed *my* sheep,” Jesus says, and he comforts the sheep to know they belong to him and not to any under-shepherd... that it is the under-shepherd's sole authority and responsibility to give you nothing other than the Good Shepherd's Word... to do nothing other than *feed* His sheep. Doesn't St Paul stake everything on this single command when he says in our first reading, “I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” In other words, ‘No one can charge me as a false shepherd who has slaughtered or misled the sheep, for I have done only what Christ has given me to

do,' Paul says, '- He has given me to feed you with the Word of Christ. Likewise,' Paul says to the pastors whom he now bids farewell, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained his own blood."

Notice what Paul says to the pastors, for it should bring you great comfort; he says, 'Be wary of the flock's needs *and* be wary of yourself, for you have a job to do in overseeing those whom God obtained with his own blood.' How blessed are you to be known by St Paul and pastors - most importantly, by *God!* - as those whom He obtained with his own blood! Such precious sheep to him, so that his apostle forewarns the pastors not to be tempted to care for you by their own ability, but always dependent on Christ. For no undershepherd is your safe-haven; you are a member of this congregation only because your safe-haven is Christ, Christ who put the under-shepherd here, Christ who put you here, Christ who put us here to together depend upon His Word and Sacrament and all the gifts He gives His Church to be safeguarded from the wolves that, St Paul forewarns, will attempt to devour the flock, even (Paul says) from within and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them." What a frightening thought... that not even the Church by itself is safe from false prophets and false doctrine that leads to condemnation and eternal death. Indeed, *especially* the Church, the only fold and haven

of the flock, will garner all the attention of the wolves, and have its castle stormed, its gates rammed, its rooftop pried open as false shepherds and false Christs seek to keep her from sharing in the comfort and safety of her Lord.

There's a woodcut artwork included in our Book of Concord – some of us in the Ladies' Book of Concord study were recently admiring it - a picture of a country church building swarmed by false shepherds of every kind, as they surround the perimeter, climb upon the roof, and seek to tear holes in the structure to find entrance and endanger the flock. But, there at the doorway is the Good Shepherd, giving safe haven to the flock. This is the image of comfort for you... the Good Shepherd who, Jesus says in our Gospel Reading, cherishes the sheep not only as His own, but also as those who belong to the Father whom has given them to the Good Shepherd, so that Good Shepherd and Owner, Jesus and the Father, they – as one – ensure that the sheep will never perish and no one will snatch you of God's hand.

But, all of that imagery sort of brings this full circle to the beginning of this sermon, when I mentioned that there's a subtle difference, but not disagreement, between doctrinal imagery and flesh-and-blood historical truth. If the comfort of all of this is in meditating upon the doctrinal imagery of the Good Shepherd, let us not forget what begins this whole meditation: the third verse of our reading: "So the Jews gathered around him and said to him: "If you

are the Christ, tell us plainly.” If you want to take comfort in the doctrinal imagery that Jesus is your Good Shepherd, then cherish the flesh-and-blood reality that He is God’s Christ, the one sent in history to lay down his life for the sheep – not as an image of sacrifice – but a sacrifice of flesh-and-blood reality. Where might you see in flesh-and-blood reality the comfort of having a Good Shepherd? – there it is as the Christ hangs on the cross. Where will you one day know forever and ever that Your Good Shepherd eternally guides you to springs of living water and God wipes every tear from your eyes? – there it is in Christ, the Lamb, in the flesh-and-blood reality of the ascended God-man being in the midst of the heavenly throne. And, until that last day, where might you taste in flesh-and-blood reality the comfort of having that Good Shepherd as yours even now? – there it is as the Christ gives you His body and blood: “Feed my sheep,” is the command carried out in flesh-and-blood reality in the Divine Service, that – in the Supper given, you have his flesh and blood, in the Word proclaimed, you hear his voice, and in flesh-and-blood reality, He gives you eternal life and no one will snatch you out of his hand.

In the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit.
 + AMEN +

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