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John 10:11-18
Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021

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

Our text, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Then, to end the reading, "I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

This fourth Sunday of Easter often known as Good Shepherd Sunday is well-timed. For three Sundays, we've shared in the proclamation of triumphant joy, of great news of Christ's victory, our own vindication, and our resurrection inheritance.

But as those three weeks of Easter unfold, we're repeatedly reminded we still live in a fallen world, and each little reminder seems to take a bit of the euphoric 'wind' of the Easter proclamation out of our sails, and our heavenly fellowship with God and each other can begin to seem at a bit of discord with the undeniable fact that life in this world isn't suddenly getting better. We still have worldly enemies endangering the Church and her members... still have worldly problems of false doctrine, of disease and death threatening the flock... and, oh yeah, we're still having to crawl back here each Sunday exhausted by our own sins and feeling we will never win the struggle against our own individual temptations. And,

amidst these ever-present conflicts, the euphoria of Eastertide can seem to fade, can't it?

And so, this Good Shepherd Sunday (and, more specifically, the Gospel text) – instead of bringing euphoric joy, it brings reassuring calm and comfort. Christ and His Spirit speak to us through this text at a level quite attuned to what's going on in our daily lives, that we might know: You have a good shepherd, a good shepherd who protects the flock in and from all danger, even as that means laying down his life for the sheep.

Our text makes that self-sacrificing love of our true Shepherd quite clear: the good shepherd cannot be mistaken for a hired hand, whose care of the sheep is self-serving. The good shepherd thinks not of himself, but only of the sheep – recall, he did not count his equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself and took on the form of a servant (a shepherd)... a servant who cared not of his reputation among sinners or his safety during time spent with the sick and the needy and the social outcasts... a servant to them all, not a hired hand (for they couldn't even hire one!), but a servant, a shepherd... even to the point of laying down his life upon the cross. And, what's more, we ought never think the dear heavenly Father would ever be so disinterested in your salvation to care for you with a hired hand... He loves you too much to leave your salvation and safety to one who agrees to a contract and is not willing to lay down his life for yours.

As a related aside, this is why any congregation that wants to see itself as hiring its pastor is only harming itself and is sinning against God. To claim a pastor is a hired hand is to want him to serve *your* interests by compensating *his* interests; but, by so doing, he will care for you only in a contractual relationship and will quit when he sees the wolf. Then, what harm befalls the sheep when there is no one to point them to Christ and to preach to them Christ and to feed them Christ in their time of need. And what need there is!: the sheep scatter out of fear of Covid. They cower in fear of Cancel Culture. They are willing to be comforted by any false doctrine that will promise them calm and comfort... all because they wanted a hired hand accountable to them, rather than an under-shepherd accountable to Christ. But, if the under-shepherd can be no hired hand, then certainly the Good Shepherd over him can be no hired hand. If we hope the undershepherd will stand his ground and lay down his life for the sheep, how much more certain can we be in the Good Shepherd who has already done so. Thus, we see, our calm and comfort is not because our pastor is a good shepherd, but because our Christ is *the* Good Shepherd.

In fact, Jesus even repeats his self-declared title twice (we often only remember the first time, but he says it twice) ... and he does so specifically to highlight what care we are promised, that is to say, he does so because we need to see *how* He is good.

First, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Here is his first promise to you... a promise so perfect and divine that “for this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again.”

In other words, the cross is the center of God’s love for you; it defines his entire ongoing relationship with you. And thus, note carefully, Jesus does not say “the good shepherd *will* lay down his life for the sheep”... doesn’t speak in future tense, even though this text happens in the weeks and months preceding the cross. Nor does he speak in past tense about the cross’ completed mission. He speaks in present tense – almost, if you will, not as if he speaks of a one-time event, but a constant state of being, that you might know he is always, always seeing himself as the crucified Christ... that you may know he always, always intercedes for and loves his Church.

Now, for the second “I am the good shepherd”: “I am the good shepherd: I *know* my own and my own *know* me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” Jesus does not lay down his life for a generic “worldwide, eternal Church” (it’s not a nameless institution) – he lays it down for you, and for the person sitting next to you, and in front of you, and behind you. He knows you by name... not as a matter of omniscience by which he knows the whole world. He knows you by name as a matter of love and unity of heart and mind, “just as the Father knows me and I know the Father.” You can’t get much more personal and intimately united than trying to

describe the relationship between the Father and Son, who – with the Spirit – are one God and one Lord, yet three persons. Likewise, you and your Good Shepherd and your fellow sheep may be three persons, but one Church, one marriage, one fold. That’s not an image of euphoric victory to shout from the roof tops; it’s a truth of comfort and calm as the world against you rages and as fleshly temptation assails you.

And, that picture of the great unity and love Christ shares with you then leads to a love among one another that lives in that comfort and calm. For, love flows from faith. If the faith is comforted and calmed by the promises of Christ, then love that flows from that faith comforts and calms as it points to the promises of Christ:

In our epistle reading, John says that as we believe in the name of Jesus, we *love one another* (v. 23) and – what does that mean tangibly? – “if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother (fellow Christian) in need,” the text begins... what is he to do? – he gives of himself, a manner of laying down his life for the brothers – a *type* of Christ that points our brother to Christ the greater *antitype*... and, thus, just as God’s love abides in Christ the greater *antitype*, so also it abides in the Christian as a *type* of Christ, as the apostle says: “Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth.” We love in deed and truth, because Christ loved us in deed and in truth, and our hearts of faith and our lives of love depend on that, don’t they? That’s a matter of calm and

comfort within the storm, isn't it? A matter of keeping our doctrine pure, our minds focused, our backbones resolved, our hope for vindication certain... which can be done only because Christ's victory and conquering of and authority over death continues to be our reason for euphoric joy...

... a **euphoric joy and divine victory** which, by the way, can be found right in our text of **comfort and calm**. It may be subtle, but it's undeniably there! For, to be the good shepherd is to have not only responsibility for the sheep, but an authority that carries with it an expectation of overcoming (having victory over) all problems and evils. In fact, this subtly is found right in the title of what he calls himself: the word for good is really "noble." "I am the Noble Shepherd" – the one who has responsibility for the sheep because he alone has subdued all enemies and thus, alone is trustworthy to be given responsibility over the dear children of God. This subtle "glory" is what Jesus speaks of in our text – "I have authority to lay down my life, and I have authority to take it up again." Indeed, "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." That's glorious! That's authoritative! That yields certain defiance in the face of our foes and faith in our certain vindication over all that would challenge Christ. We can believe in Jesus, risk our lives depending on Jesus, because of that subtle authoritative glory of Jesus.

Marin Luther confesses as much in his *Little Prayer Book*: "I do not only believe that Jesus Christ is the one true God of God... but

I also believe that the Father has made all things subject to him.”

That’s what it means to be *the Shepherd*, isn’t it? That the *owner* of the sheep, the *Father* of the adopted children, has put them under the care of the Shepherd precisely because the owner knows the sheep will be safe with that shepherd because all enemies and dangers are subject to that shepherd, and he *will* care for and lead and teach and feed those sheep and ultimately deliver them at the end of the day to their comfortable sheepfold and glorious dwelling.

Notice how this subtle glory, this subtle certainty of victory and of power over all our enemies, how it so thoroughly permeates our readings:

In our first reading, from Acts 4, Peter says, “...*by the name of* Jesus Christ of Nazareth... - *by him* this man is standing before you well... *there is no other name under heaven* by which we may be saved.”

Again, in our epistle reading, John writes to the Church that “This is [God’s] commandment... that we believe *in the name of his Son*, Jesus Christ.” Indeed, what divine authority, glory belongs to Jesus, that God’s summary of the entire Ten Commandments comes down to this one: trust Jesus... all that he has said, all that he has done, that he has proven himself to be as your Good Shepherd.

And, speaking of the subtle glory and authority of that Good Shepherd, from our Gospel reading in John 10, we hear Jesus say, “I am” (ego eimi) – the very name of God – “I AM” Jesus says (that’s

glorious!), and as your great I AM, Jesus says, “I will bless and keep and comfort you as the Good (*kalos* – noble) Shepherd.”

Thus, the Scriptural image of the Good Shepherd – which Jesus himself gives– that image of our Good Shepherd ought be a mainstay in our daily lives... not because it’s a touchy-feely metaphor of a loving shepherd, who loves just you and who cares about no one else... but because it is the true promise of our flesh-and-blood Noble Shepherd who is also the God-man, crucified and risen – having laid down his life and having taken it up again – so that he has authority over all and forgives us our sins, shelters us in his presence, feeds us his Word and Sacraments, and gives us every reason for both calm and joy:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.

He leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul.

He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord **forever**.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son

And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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