

“Our Good Shepherd”

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15).

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). In these words, Jesus employed a metaphor that God had used to describe His relationship with His people throughout the Old Testament. And it is language we all know. In fact, His words echo some of the most reassuring phrases in the Bible where David wrote in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul...Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me; Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.”

These well-known promises communicate a powerful and personal message about our God who waits and watches, who feeds and strengthens, and who guides and protects and shelters His sheep from the storms of life. You would think that no one could ever reject such wonderful words of assurance and yet there are many who receive these words with disdain and there are many more who have never even heard the hope these words contain. The fact is that this world is filled with brothers and sisters who are on their own in every way; who are lost and wandering with no concept of grace and no knowledge of a Shepherd who desires to forgive and gather and feed His flock. And the context for today’s Gospel reading provides a vivid illustration of this truth.

In the verses that lead up to today’s Good Shepherd reading from John, Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. In a moving display of grace and power Jesus brought light and sight into the dark world of a man who had never seen the beauty of a sunrise or the faces of his loved ones. Chapter nine details this compassionate miracle and then follows the Pharisees as they investigate it. After he is healed, the once-blind man is brought before the Jewish leaders who interrogate him and then proceed to insult him and berate his testimony until finally he is thrown out of the assembly in disgrace.

The harsh response of the Jewish leaders seems astonishing to us, but you see these Pharisees were so tied to their own ideas of “righteousness” that they could not recognize the Shepherd. They couldn’t conceive of a God who would heal this undeserving, blind beggar – *especially when it was done on the Sabbath*. They had frankly forgotten what it meant to be sheep and they flatly rejected the voice of the Shepherd. These men of the law held to a rigid code of religious regulations and this unauthorized healing threatened their power and it weakened their ability to control the message and so they cursed the man, and condemned him as a sinner, and threw him out of their assembly.

When Jesus heard about the actions of the Pharisees, He found the man and He greeted him with an amazing question. Jesus said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” In these words, Jesus was confronting a man who had just been excommunicated with a question about his belief in the Messiah and, in an honest response, the man said, “Who is he, sir...that I may believe?” To this humble request Jesus answered, “He is the one speaking with you.” And John goes on to tell us that when the man heard this revelation from the mouth of Jesus he believed Him and worshipped Him (John 9:35-38).

Jesus said, *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”* In this account from John’s Gospel we see a stark contrast between the Good Shepherd and the hired hands. Here, the works-righteous, self-serving nature of the Pharisees is unmasked and the difference between the Shepherd’s flock and the Jewish church becomes crystal clear. Martin Luther once wrote that “a seven-

year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd.” And that’s what we see in the man born blind. This man clings to the voice of the Shepherd because in this voice he heard forgiveness; in this voice he experienced healing; and from this voice he received the words of life.

The Shepherd does not speak in the moralistic language of men. Today, this seems so clear. And yet before we completely disregard the Pharisees, we need to understand that their law-driven theology is also a tremendous temptation for us. All too easily, we fall into the same self-righteous view of the world; comparing and keeping score, while working hard to hide our own damning flaws. But you see, the Shepherd didn’t come to tell us what we should do or do better, the Shepherd didn’t come to threaten our bad behavior, and the Shepherd didn’t come to condemn (John 3:17). Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd came to call us by name. And He came to lay down His life for the sheep. And He came to seek and save the lost. And through the voice of our Good Shepherd we are brought back to the Father.

Today’s reading from Acts 4 is another wonderful expression of the Shepherd’s voice. In this reading, Peter and John are arrested and threatened with execution because they were “proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 4:2). And my friends, *that is* the message of the Gospel! And that is voice of the Shepherd! And that is exactly why we are here today! You see, today we have gathered to hear a message that we cannot hear anywhere else in the world, and that message is the clear proclamation that Jesus Christ has shed His blood for the world’s sins, that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead for the world’s salvation, and that Jesus Christ is here today offering us eternal life. In this resurrection message, and in our fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, we know the Shepherd and the Shepherd knows us...and it doesn’t stop here. Not only does God call, feed, defend, and care for you. The Good Shepherd cares for the world, and He does it through *the risen Christ* embodied in *you*; through your love, through your forgiveness, and through your mercy lived out in real, everyday life!

Jesus said, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also” (John 10:16). And just as God has revealed Himself to us through His simple Word and Sacraments, He also reveals Himself to brothers and sisters who are on their own in every way; who are lost and wandering with no concept of grace and no knowledge of the Shepherd who desires to forgive and gather and feed His flock. And in the simple service you and I do for our neighbors, and through the simple message of a God who lays down His life for the world...the Shepherd speaks.

We are known by the Shepherd and we have experienced the body of Christ, and now, in concrete, specific, and practical ways we are called to share the voice of the Shepherd with others. The Gospel has given us the freedom to do this; to love as Christ has loved us; to serve our neighbor as Christ has served us; and in our active, caring, and real expression of God’s love in big and small ways, we speak the Gospel...and the voice of the Shepherd is heard...and His sheep are saved! Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...and I lay down my life for the sheep.” Go in the peace of this promise God has made to you today in the voice of our Good Shepherd. Amen.

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