

## “The Goodness of the Good Shepherd”

John 10:11-18

April 22, 2018

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Imagine winning a contest in which you get to choose the prize which you most want. The sponsoring company would give you a brand-new car, a brand-new home, \$5000 a month for life, or a large supreme pizza from Pizza Hut. As crazy as that is, imagine you get to choose and you chose the pizza. Is there anything wrong with the pizza? Not at all. A large supreme pizza is a very good thing to have, especially when you're hungry. However, compared with all of the prizes from which you had the opportunity to choose, it seems like a prize of low value, as well as a foolish choice being made. Would we ever do something as foolish as this for something as worthless as that pizza? Our Gospel reading for today shows us that we just might.

Christians who follow the liturgical calendar know that, in the middle of the Easter season, we celebrate a day called Good Shepherd Sunday. Today is the day for that beloved holiday. I say “beloved” because people love this holiday, usually for sentimental reasons. In other words, the story and the visuals are just too darn cute.

First of all, we have sheep. Many people, especially city folk who don't deal with sheep on a regular basis, believe that sheep are obedient, humble, soft and cuddly creatures. Second of all, we have shepherds. Shepherds are often thought of as fine young boys who simply keep an eye on the sheep, much like babysitting your younger brother and sister.

However, these are great misunderstandings which need to be cleared up before we consider the comparison. If we don't understand the set up, then we won't understand the conclusion. First of all, as I have said many times before, the biblical designation of people as being like sheep is not a complement of any kind, nor does it have anything to do with cuteness or obedience. The designation of people being like sheep, is because we are stupid in our thinking and our choices. We are foolish in our actions and deeds. We think only of ourselves and do only for ourselves. That gets us into problem as the prophet Isaiah writes, “all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – everyone – to his own way.” (Isaiah 53:6) It is our sin which makes us like sheep, nothing else.

The same applies to shepherds. Shepherds are not weak individuals, dressed in bathrobes, as we think of them in every Christmas Eve service any church puts on. Shepherds are not always just simple kind and gentle caretakers. Rather, shepherds can often be strong and powerful men who use their strength and their might to care for the sheep.

Yet Israel had suffered through many bad shepherds throughout the years. In Ezekiel 34, the Lord is furious with the leaders of His people – those shepherds – who are failing to take care of the sheep while busy stuffing themselves with food and good things. The Lord is so furious that he promises to come and shepherd the people Himself. So when Jesus comes on the scene and proclaims himself to be the “Good Shepherd”, He is not only claiming to be a shepherd, but the Lord God Himself.

When we think of the image of the “Good Shepherd”, we think of Jesus as the great provider for the sheep. He cares for the sheep and takes care of their needs. We remember the words of Psalm 23: “He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness.” In other words, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, provides food, shelter, guidance, and all the things we need for this life. As Luther says in his Small Catechism under the explanation to the First Article, “He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life.”

Unfortunately, our perception of Jesus as our Shepherd usually stops right there. That’s all we see Jesus as: a heavenly Genie who dispenses material blessings. Jesus exists to give us stuff. Too often, the perception of prayer, by Christians and non-Christians alike, is that of a laundry list of the things we need for the here and now. All too often, we go to God only to ask him for food, clothing, shelter, healing from diseases, help with our schoolwork, a promotion at work, and so on. When we received these blessings, we rejoice and credit the goodness of the good Shepherd for having given them to us.

However, when we do this, it makes about as much sense as rejoicing over the securing of a supreme pizza when the contest offers new cars new homes and unlimited money. It’s not that these blessings aren’t good or aren’t needed, but in focusing our attention solely on this aspect of the good Shepherd, we are selling Jesus woefully short. The “goodness” of the Good Shepherd involves so much more that Jesus has done so they might give us so much more.

We have a far greater need than what we will fill our bellies with and what we will clothe our bodies with. We have a far greater need than a house to live in in a car to drive. We have a far greater need than an adequate paycheck to buy the necessities and provide for the pleasures of life. We have a far greater need than most people, even Christians, ever consider. It is greater than the need for physical necessities, healing, financial help, and protection. It is the need to be at peace and harmony with God, our Creator.

We have a far greater problem than a lack of money, health, or necessities of life. We have the problem of sin. Sin is the problem that destroys the peace and breaks off this harmony with God. Sin is not merely the big-ticket items like murder and theft. Sin is any action, as well as any thought or word, that opposes the will of God. Yes, it is doing evil according to the 10 Commandments. However, it is also thinking evil or speaking evil. In addition, sin is failing to do all of the good which God requires of us in service to Him and especially to our neighbor. However, it is also failing to think good or speak good about our God and about our neighbor.

The consequences – God’s judgment against sin – is far worse than any physical need we can imagine. It’s not that we just have a poor life because of sin, it is that we have no life because of sin. The wage we deserve and receive for sin is death. Death is bad enough and the pagan world thinks that death is the end. However, because of sin, death is but a transition of separation from God now on earth to a separation of God forever in a place called hell. This is our most important problem. This is our great need.

Yet, do we ever think of this? Does it ever concern us? Do we pray night and day for delivery from this mess? It seems that many people in America, those who consider themselves to be Christian as well as those who don't, think that the point of the Good Shepherd is that He takes care of us, cuddles us, and provides us with all the things we need for this life and especially for many blessings that we don't need but make life enjoyable.

This is shown by how our prayers are often framed. "Lord, bless us. Lord, we need such and such and so on so Lord, give me this, that or the other thing." The view of prayer in the public by pagan Americans is no different. Prayer is a way to get stuff to make this life better. How often have we heard prayers, imploring God to rescue us from hell and damnation? How often do we take it seriously? Do we soften things up by focusing on the material needs and hiding this great need in the background?

Our text today deals with something far different than regular care in feeding, clothing, sheltering, leading and others things. Our text deals with a solution to a problem that only Jesus could accomplish. Government welfare agencies, private charities, and generous individual citizens can take care of physical needs and God, at times, uses these people to do just that. The only problem that human effort cannot overcome is the most important problem of all: death and hell. This is the problem Jesus came to tackle head-on. Jesus proclaims himself to be the Good Shepherd, not because He could feed people (although he did) and not because He could heal people (although he did). Jesus says, "I am the good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Jesus shows His great goodness by using His great power to overcome the greatest problem, sin, and provide for our greatest need, to be right with God now and eternally. He does this by voluntarily laying down His life. This would've struck the hearers as being odd. A shepherd dying for his sheep happened rarely in Israel in those days. And, if it did happen, it was by accident not by design. The death of the shepherd for his sheep was considered a failure, not a success.

Jesus, however, lays down His life intentionally for the very purpose of rescuing His people from sin and its consequences, up to and including death. To many, even to this day, this seems to be a failure done in weakness. However, this was precisely the sacrifice required and the payment necessary for sin, the sin of the world. It is, as the hymn puts it, "What punishment so strange is suffered yonder! The Shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander; the Master pays the debt His servants owe Him, Who would not know him." When Jesus cried out with his final breath, as He hung dying on the cross, "It is finished!" The debt was paid. Forgiveness was obtained. And humanity was saved from death and hell.

But that's not all. Jesus claims, not only the power and authority to lay down His life, but He claims the authority to take up His life again. In other words, the goodness of our Good Shepherd is not just that He died to earn forgiveness for our sin and make us right with God. He also did much more. Jesus obviously could not do for us what He couldn't do for himself, that is, live past death. So, Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, coming back to live and never more to die. Jesus, not only takes up His life again as an

example or a reason for rejoicing, but as the very power by which God will raise our bodies and make them like His.

This is truly amazing and worthy of celebrating, not only during the Easter season, but every day of our lives. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has not only met our physical needs; not only blessed us with luxuries; but He is so good because He met our most important needs by overcoming our greatest problem. Where we experienced guilt and faced punishment, Jesus gained forgiveness for us through His death on the cross. Where we experience sadness and faced fear due to death, Jesus gained life for us through His resurrection from the dead. As we experienced doubt or worry because of the situation we find ourselves in, Jesus has given us hope. There is certainty here in our salvation. This is no accident and no fluke. This has been done intentionally by Jesus for our good. As Jesus says, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. 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."

Do not let this great day in the midst of the 50 Great Days of Easter become wrapped up in shallow sentimentality. See sheep, not in the light of cuteness, but in the light of sin and condemnation. See the imagery of the good shepherd, not in a nice kind young man, but a fighter, a battler, a mighty warrior who puts it all on the line for the sheep. The goodness of the Good Shepherd is not that He provides us with all of our earthly needs (although he does) nor that he simply leads us in the right ways (which he does), but that He claims all authority, exercises all authority, and overcomes the guilt of sin, the fear of death, and the threat of everlasting punishment. The goodness of this Good Shepherd is that he cares for our greatest good. Amen