

# "The Whole Counsel of God"

Acts 20:17-35

April 21, 2013

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

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is traditionally known as "Good Shepherd Sunday". This designation brings to mind images of sheep and shepherds. We tend to think of sheep as cute and innocent animals – almost pet-like in nature. We may think of shepherds as kindly and meek men whose job it is to love the sheep and keep a passive eye on the sheep as they skip through the meadows in their child-like innocence doing whatever they please.

In applying this analogy to ourselves on this day, we may think of ourselves like sheep in the sense that we are lovable creatures of God who are basically good in what we do or intend to do. Jesus is our Good Shepherd who proudly smiles at us and keeps a passive eye on us as we skip through the meadow of life, doing what we want and being basically good people.

Both the analogy and the application are very wrong.

Sheep are far from cute and innocent animals. Sheep, in Biblical times, were seen as being not very smart creature who loved to wander. They would not naturally go into the sheep pen and, given the chance, would love to wander from the sheep pen. On their own, they would be killed by wolves and other predators.

The shepherd, on the other hand, far from being a passive weak person, was a strong man who loved his sheep deeply and was actively involved in caring for and protecting his sheep. A shepherd would make his sheep to lie down in green pastures and lead them beside still waters that they might be fed and nourished. He would lead them along the right paths to keep them safe. When sheep wandered from the shepherd and the safety of the sheep pen, the shepherd would fight for his sheep. He would place himself between the sheep and the predator. With his rod, he would beat off the dangerous predator. With his staff, he would pull

the sheep to safety, even when it wasn't always comfortable or enjoyable for the sheep. Out of genuine love for the sheep, he would do that which was for their own good and not always what they may have wanted.

The Bible compares us with sheep and it is not intended as a compliment. We are not very smart in the ways of God. The prophet, Isaiah, says of people, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way." (Is. 53:6) We are easily duped by the devil, the world we live in, and even by our own selves. We don't naturally want to enter into the sheep pen of God (otherwise known as His Church). We would prefer to stay outside where we think it's much more fun. And, when we are safely in God's sheep pen, we often given in to temptations to leave it, figuring, "What harm is there in leaving for a short time and going only a short distance away? It will be fun." However, outside the safety of God's sheep pen, our enemy, the devil, is like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. On our own, the devil will snatch us up and devour us. And that means not only physical death in the grave, but spiritual death in hell forever.

Jesus is called our Good Shepherd, not because He is a good guy who passively leaves us alone to do what we want, unless, of course, we want something of Him, but because He is actively involved in caring for us and protecting us. He loves us too much to do nothing or leave us to our own devices. Jesus seeks out humanity like a shepherd seeking sheep, to bring us back to God and the safety of His sheep pen, the Church.

To do this, Jesus puts Himself between us and the Predator who wishes to destroy us. But Jesus goes above and beyond the call of duty for a normal shepherd. When we scattered like sheep, each going his own way, the Lord did not destroy us as we deserved. Instead, Isaiah says, "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all." This Shepherd does not abandon His sheep or give only partial effort to save them. This Shepherd dies for His sheep. As Isaiah said, "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him

was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.” (Is. 53:6)

We are healed of our sins by having them forgiven. We are spared from the death which the devil seeks to inflict upon us. By bringing back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd, God has given us a life in Him that never ends.

But now what? How is that life to be lived out? That’s the question addressed in our first reading for today. Paul is meeting with the elders (that is, the pastors) of the church in Ephesus while he is on his way to Jerusalem. He tells them, “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 with his own blood.”

The Holy Spirit has called and appointed men to serve as shepherds under the Good Shepherd. The word, *pastor*, means shepherd. These pastors/shepherds operate with the Good Shepherd’s authority. They speak for Him. Jesus said to the first batch of such shepherds, “Whoever listens to you, listens to me.” (Luke 10:17) They also dispense the forgiveness Jesus obtained with His own blood. Jesus said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:23) With this authority, pastors seek to care for God’s sheep – His flock – His Church.

But how do they do this? Many would like preachers to just stick with a positive and upbeat message that makes people only feel good about themselves. Stay away from anything negative that would make people feel bad. Inspire people! If a preacher is going to speak about evil, let it be about the evil that is out there in the world in the Sandy Hook School in Newtown, at the Boston Marathon in Boston, and in the fertilizer plant in west Texas. For when we hear about evil like that, then we can unite together against such evil and feel good about that uniting together.

As a pastor who is also a sinful human being, I would like nothing more than to do just that. I would love to tell inspiring stories and amusing anecdotes that make you feel warm

inside and good about yourselves. If you feel good about yourself, then you'll probably feel good about me and that would be nice. I'd love to just rail about the evil and injustice of this world. Such preachers are popular and who wouldn't want to be popular?

However, as a pastor/shepherd who has been called and appointed to speak the Lord's words on His behalf, I can't do that. I love you too much to do that. I am duty bound to do more. Faithful pastors/shepherds are to model the example of Paul in our text who said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." This means everything God would have us know – the parts we want to hear as well as the parts we don't want to hear. As somebody put it, "The job of the pastor is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

My job is to speak God's Law to you in all of its severity. Some don't like this or can't handle it. I'm reminded of the movie, "A Few Good Men" where Lt. Daniel Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise) is cross examining Col. Nathan Jessup (played by Jack Nicholson). Lt. Jessup defiantly asked, "Do you want answers?" Kaffee responds, "I want the truth." To which Jessup shouts, "You can't handle the truth!" Can you handle the truth of God's Law, not when it condemns you in some general way, but when it speaks of things which specifically affect your life: sexual behavior, divorce/remarriage, priorities, gossiping, loving one another, the place of money and material things in your life, and so on?

I am compelled and cannot shrink from proclaiming God's Law as He declares it to be, not as you or I or our culture deems it to be. I will help you measure your lives against the holy and unchanging will of God....and the results won't be pretty. The Law of God shows that evil does not exist only in Newtown or Boston, but it exists in each one of us. We have all, without exception, gone against God's will, broken His law, and sinned. We have not sinned in some sort of general way, but we have sinned in thought, word, and deed; by what we have done and by what we have left undone. This truly afflicts any who are comfortable in their present life style.

As bad as this message is and as bad as it makes us feel, it is very necessary for us to hear. It is like a diagnosis which a doctor gives us for a life-threatening disease. It's tough, I'm sure, for a doctor to give such a diagnosis and, as patients, we would not like to hear that diagnosis. But not hearing that diagnosis does not mean we are healthy. The sickness will still kill us. The value of a diagnosis is that it leads us to a cure.

Hearing the Law in all of its severity directs us to repentance. By God's grace working through His Word, we come to see our sin and turn from it to the cure. Through the proclamation of the Gospel in all its sweetness, pastors/shepherds are able to comfort the afflicted. Pastor/shepherds make you to lie down in the green pastures of God's Holy Word which nourish you with His love. Pastor/shepherds lead you to the still waters of Holy Baptism which convey the forgiveness which our Good Shepherd won on the cross to you by washing away your sins. Pastor/shepherds restore the your souls by feeding you with the body and blood of our Good Shepherd Jesus in the Holy Communion. And pastor/shepherds lead you in the paths of righteousness for the sake of the Lord's name by teaching His Word in church and speaking His Word in homes, hospital rooms, schools, job sites, and wherever God's people gather and need to hear it.

I saw a cartoon that showed two people sitting in Bible Class. One turns to the other with an amazed look on his face and says, "Now tell me the truth: when was the last time you saw the whole counsel of God in one PowerPoint presentation?" As an undershepherd of the Good Shepherd, it is my intent, with God's help to do the same as Paul. I will not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. But it will not happen in one powerpoint presentation, or in one Bible Class, or in one sermon. It will require a long time, but the basic message is and always remains the same: hear the Law of God which will drive you to repentance and confession; hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ which comforts you and delivers forgiveness for all of your sins. I will teach that, preach that, speak that, and proclaim

it in many different ways and in many different situations. It's really all I have. And it's really all you need for a truly peaceful and contented life now and for a truly awesome life in heaven eternally. Amen.