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Easter 4b
April 29, 2012

What Good Is a Dead Shepherd? John 10:11-18

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The word from God through which Jesus, our Good Shepherd, speaks to us is John 10.

I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hireling, whose not the shepherd and doesn't have the sheep as his own, sees the wolf coming, leaves the sheep, and flees. Then the wolf seizes them and scatters them. That man does so because he's a hireling and doesn't care about the sheep.

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. And I lay down my life for the sheep.

I have other sheep also, who are not from this pen. I must lead them also, and they will hear my voice. There will be one flock, one Shepherd.

My Father loves me because of this: I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one seizes it from me, but I myself on my own lay it down. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. (John 10:11-18).

This is the word of our Lord.

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

A. Better than a hireling

How much would you sacrifice for your own children? Parents give of their time, their energy, their money. They sit up those long hours with a sick child. They pay the bills that come in for food, for clothes, for braces, for insurance. They pray for their child, bringing their hopes and worries for the future to the Lord. They would even give their life to save their child.

How much would you do for a stranger? I'm not talking about a foster child or an adopted child. They become your own. How much would you do for a child you never met? We might give some of our money as a charitable gift. We might donate a portion of our time, especially if it's a needy child and we can help provide food or clothing or Sunday school lessons to teach them about Jesus. But would you put your own livelihood at risk? Would you put them before your own family? Would you give your life for them, leaving your own children as orphans?

Of course not. As parents you have a God-given responsibility to care for the children God has given you. But that contrast between caring for your own children compared to strangers helps us see the contrast Jesus brings out in the text.

The sheep were strangers to this hired man. They weren't his own. He didn't care about them. And even the translation "hired man" might give us the wrong idea if we don't note the context. Notice it doesn't say that the Shepherd hired him or sent him or entrusted the sheep to his care in any sort of way. He's not working for the shepherd as an under-shepherd. Rather this guy is just in it for the money like a mercenary. He sees the sheep and sees dollar signs -- cha-ching! What could he get for their wool, their skin, their meat? How could he fleece them? He's just a money-grubber, a gold-digger, a hireling. No wonder he runs when the wolf comes.

But look at Jesus. He knows his sheep from the very depths of his heart, better than a mother knows her baby cooing in her lap. He knows his sheep even as the Father knows him and he knows the Father. He knows you, dear Christian. He knows you by name. And as much as parents love their children, that doesn't even begin to match Jesus' love for you and me, his sheep. Look at the rich glories of heaven that he set aside to become poor

without a place of his own, even being laid in a manger where sheep would feed. But that was just the beginning. Here he brings out the full extent of his shepherd-love: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15 NIV84). That's what he did for you, dear friend. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for you. He died your death as your Substitute. The hireling would sacrifice the sheep, but the Good Shepherd sacrificed himself in their place.

But what good is a dead shepherd? Think about that.

B. Better for *all* the sheep

Now as we mentioned at the beginning, parents naturally love their own children. But Jesus talks about other sheep as well. Do you remember that from the text?

To understand that, let's go back about twenty centuries before Christ to the days of Abraham. The Lord had promised him that his descendants would be a great nation through which the Savior would come to bring blessings for all peoples. Through Moses the Lord had brought Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, out of Egypt to the land he had promised their forefathers. After he gave them the land, he eventually brought David to the throne through whom the Savior would come. Do you see how God's saving plan from Abraham until Jesus centered around this one nation, the Israelites?

Jesus himself was born a Jew. His family and friends, the people he grew up with, his fellow country-men -- they were all Jews, Israelites, descended from Abraham. That's where Jesus carried on his ministry -- among the Israelites. So when Jesus talks about other sheep, he is looking beyond Abraham's bloodline. He came as the Shepherd for all the sheep, not only the Jews who would believe in him as the Messiah but also the believing Gentiles. He came to shepherd all who hear his voice and follow where he leads, no matter what nation, language, race, or group they come from. He came for you and me, dear Christian. As the Good Shepherd he laid down his life all his sheep, for each one of us. But what good is a dead shepherd? There's that question again.

Before we address it though, let's think about our attitude toward other sheep. Here's Jesus' attitude: "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16 NIV84). His love compels him. His voice earnestly calls to them. He leads them together as one flock united in faith under one Shepherd. There's a diversity among the sheep, a diversity of customs, languages, races, ethnicity, family origins, social status, classes, incomes, education, and the like, but not a diversity of faith. All the sheep listen to the same Shepherd, the one Good Shepherd. All the sheep are united in the one true faith, forming the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints, the one flock found throughout the world wherever the Shepherd's voice calls out from his Word and Sacraments.

Now as followers of Jesus, you know that he laid down his life for all kinds of sheep. And it's easy enough to stand by that principle when everyone around looks about the same as we do, the biggest language difference is that some say "oofda" more than others than others, and the culture divide is that some actually like lutefisk.

But what about if you hear someone speaking Spanish or some other language? Does that put you off or strike you as rude? Do you become suspicious wondering if they're talking about you? What about when the smell of their foods twitch our nose and when the way some dress strikes our eyes as different or disrespectful, do we think those people are strange? Does the behavior of other cultures strike you as unusual, maybe even obnoxious? It doesn't even have to be a different culture, just a different class or age group. We might not even realize what our reactions would be until we come into contact with them. Then we might excuse our reaction by saying they're not nice to me or they're not trying to adapt to my country that they're in? But isn't that already being judgmental, even if we try to justify our attitude by saying that they are being rude or insensitive? Are we matching Jesus' attitude?

Do you let such reactions distance you from those who are different, or do you see them as people for whom the Shepherd died, just as he did for you? That's how much he

longs to bring them into his flock. If they do not yet know the Shepherd, we can't really expect them to act Christian towards us, can we. But couldn't you, dear Christian, invite them to hear his voice? Couldn't you welcome them? Couldn't the Shepherd call to them through you and lead them into his flock through the Gospel you share? If they already follow the Shepherd in faith, do you see them as united with you in the same flock under the same Shepherd? Do you see them as fellow sheep, brothers and sisters in Christ who will spend eternity together before his throne? Do you treat them accordingly here in time?

Our love for others falls short of the Shepherd's love. Even towards our fellow Christians united with us in the same faith, we find meanness, hurt, strife, self-centeredness, a lack of care and understanding. How shallow our love can be! How great our need! Only the Good Shepherd can pay for such sin, such ingratitude. Only he can substitute himself in our place to atone for us. And that's what he has done. He laid down his life for you.

But what good is a dead shepherd? Let's finally address that question.

C. Better because he lives

Jesus answers it, doesn't he? "The reason the Father loves me is that I lay down my life -- only to 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 authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father" (John 10:17, 18 NIV84).

What good is a dead shepherd? No good at all. But the Good Shepherd is not dead. Yes, he did certainly die. He laid down his life. His dead, lifeless corpse was laid in a tomb. But he took it up his life again. He lives. The Good Shepherd lives.

This was the Father's plan of love to save sinners like you and me. He sent his Son to lay down his life in our place -- in your place, dear sinner. He sent his Son as the sacrifice that alone pays for the sins of the world, including all of yours and mine. And the Son, Jesus Christ, came willingly on his own accord, in perfect sync with his Father's will. He had the power and authority to lay down his life. The Sanhedrin and Pilate and the Roman soldiers did not take it from him. He gave himself. He sacrificed himself. He laid down his life for you.

And then he took it up again. He rose from the dead. He had that power and authority. How Easter displays that power! How Easter proclaims him the living Shepherd who died for his sheep but then took up his life again.

Listen as your Shepherd speaks to you through his word and sacraments. He knows you as his own dear sheep. Don't listen to those he hasn't sent, to those who change his words. Those are the hirelings who don't truly care about the sheep. When sheep listen to such teachers, Satan seizes and scatters them with his lies and false doctrine.

Listen as your Shepherd speaks to you through his word and sacraments. He knows you as his own dear sheep. Don't you want to know him better and better? Look at what your Good Shepherd says, "I know my sheep and my sheep know me -- just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14, 15 NIV84). What a goal for us to grow towards! What purpose for your life! To grow to know Jesus even as he knows you. To grow to know Jesus as the Son knows the Father.

What good is a dead shepherd? That's not the right question, because the Shepherd who died for you now lives forever and ever. And you, dear Christian, can grow to know him better and better.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.