

In Jesus' Care

Text: John 10:11-16

Hymn: "The King of Love My Shepherd Is" (*LSB* 709)

"I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. "The good shepherd lays down his life for this sheep." Which just isn't true. A good shepherd stays alive. He's not much use for the sheep if he isn't alive. As I'm sure you all remember, last year, when preaching on this text, I pointed out that the Greek has more than one word for "good." One kind of good has to do with skill. Another kind of good has to do with character. When Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd, he's not saying "Of all the shepherds that have ever shepherded, I'm the shepherdest." No, He's saying that He is the shepherd who is a good man. You could almost translate it as "the noble shepherd." Because, of course, in terms of skill, staying alive is skill number one. But in terms of character, putting others before yourself, even when those others are worth less than yourself, that's nobility of character. And if you think it's a very odd balance sheet where a shepherd would lay down his life in order to save the life of his sheep, how about reckoning things in such a way that the life of the Son of God comes out worth less than the life of His wayward, rebellious creatures?

But that's exactly what we're talking about when we speak of the death of Jesus for us. The Son of God, who is not only pure and holy and blameless but who is the Creator and who is the offended party in our sin, against whom we have sinned and from whom we rightly ought to expect righteous punishment, lays down his life for us, so that we may not die. In fact, Jesus' parable here of himself as the Good Shepherd is in a way inappropriate, because it's far too charitable toward us. It makes all of us seem valuable, which we in ourselves are not to God. Your life, my life does not make God's

life happier as though we somehow add value to God's existence. The value that your life and your salvation has is entirely to your benefit. It pleases God only because He's pleased with saving you. It pleases Him because it satisfies His love and His mercy. As the Twenty-Third Psalm puts it: He leads us in paths of righteousness not because we deserve it, or because we're so darn adorable, but *for His name's sake*.

So, the contrast between a good shepherd, a shepherd that is noble and good in himself, and a hired hand is in this seemingly irrational affection for his sheep; that he's willing to die for a commodity, for something that is replaceable, something that isn't in itself worth his own life. Jesus was willing to die for you even though you're not worth it in yourself. But He *was willing* to die for you because He is invested in loving you and has considered you to be worthy of his trouble and the suffering of his death solely on account of his goodness. And this is why the fact that Jesus is the shepherd who is a good man is Gospel, *good* news. Because if this is the case, then the *certainty* of His love doesn't depend on your value. It doesn't depend on your conduct. It doesn't depend on your track record. It doesn't depend on anything other than *His* character and what He makes of Himself for you.

In almost area of life either literally or metaphorically we are making trades all the time. We are investing in things and we are giving things in expectation of getting something back. We give money to people and we expect them to give us a good or service. We spend time with people and we expect back from them their attention and friendship. We make promises of lifelong faithfulness to a person in the expectation the other person will make the same promises to us and keep them.

Everything in life seems to be a form of trade. I give something and I expect something in return. It's only natural that when humans are left to their own devices to think about what God is like and to craft religions in keeping with those ideas, human religion also becomes a trade, either a subtle trade or a really blatant one, where God gives us something in expectation of us paying him back or we give God something in expectation of God giving us something back.

The radical difference, the uniqueness of the faith that we have been given through God's Word is that *there is no such trade*. Jesus did not die expecting to be paid back. God did not create us in expectation of being paid back. Jesus did what He did knowing that there is nothing that we can give to Him that He doesn't already have. Let's say you make what seems to you a great sacrifice of something of yours for the kingdom of God. But where did you get it in the first place? Whatever it is that you're sacrificing—your life, your time, your goods—those things came to you from God in the first place! So when you give them to the kingdom of God you're simply returning them to their original owner. All that we have, all that we are, is His and His gift, "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things," as Paul writes to the Romans (11:36).

That is what your heavenly Father is like. That is the kingdom into which you have been called through His Son Jesus Christ. It's a kingdom created entirely by God's giving of gifts, the greatest gift of which is His own Son, who died that you might live, who was raised from the dead so that you might have eternal life.

Now some of you live lives that are fairly laid back and relatively secure. You just sail through life. Some of you are anxious and worried about everything. And the rest of you are somewhere in between. Whether we feel steady or unsteady, relaxed or

upset, depends partly on our experience and past, partly on our personalities and characters. It can also come and go: The laid-back can become anxious and vice versa. What we need and what God has given us is a steady and firm ground where we know that whatever else is going on, however else we are feeling about everything else, we have one place where we can be entirely safe. And that is in the care of our Lord Jesus Christ. Not only are we safe in the safety of numbers—and as members of the church, we are part of the largest family on earth, of every tribe and language and people—but more wonderful yet, we have a shepherd who has invested everything of himself into the well-being of his sheep. Your well-being in this life and the life to come is of such great concern to Jesus that he will make every sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice, invest whatever it takes, so that you may be well cared for and stay in His care throughout every day of your life, even through the valley of the shadow of death itself and into everlasting life.

How does this happen? As Jesus Himself says before and after our text this morning: “My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me.” When we hear the voice of Jesus, when we attend to the word of God and above all to the Gospel, which is the voice of Jesus, we are in the care of Jesus and are being led by Him to those green pastures and refreshing waters of which we sing today. Jesus Himself is our Shepherd. What He promised He has done. And what he has set out to do He will also bring to completion. By grace may God keep us in Jesus’ flock, faithfully hearing his voice and following wherever he may lead, until we are brought to sit at the table that He has prepared before us in the presence of our enemies.

Pastor Brent McGuire
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church