

Sermon Easter 3 2021

April 18, 2021

John 10:11-16

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Five Hundred years ago today, a lowly Augustinian monk who had been born in tiny Eisleben Germany, educated in Eisenach and Erfurt, then called to be a professor at the newly formed Wittenberg University, made history. This unprivileged theologian stood before royalty and the honored, and before the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire himself and they demanded his response. Would he take back the writings that he had published over the last three and a half years? Would he recant of all of his criticisms of the Pope and the Church? Would he quit causing all of this trouble and just leave it all alone? The day before, the question had been asked and this monastic had demurred. He had asked for more time and consideration. But not the moment arrived and he couldn't delay a response any more. If he would recant, things could go very smoothly for him. If they didn't he would be an outlaw, at risk of death anytime and in any place. What would his answer be?

I'm guessing most of you know the end of this story. That monk, one Martin Luther, stood before prince and Emperor and made that great confession in which he is reported to have said: *"Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen."*

As Luther continued his work in the Reformation, he proved his conviction of those words. He proved time and time again how his conscience was bound by the Scriptures, captive to the Word of God. And as he did so, there were some times he expressed and confessed that conviction in a way that was gentle and full of sympathy. Other times he lashed out like a vicious animal at his opponent. But no matter the circumstance, he showed his desire to be faithful.

As we reflect on that steadfastness, it's a good reminder. It's not often that we have the threat of death in view of our confession. I can imagine that no one in this sanctuary has ever experienced an immediate attack on their existence if they

confessed their faith. And yet Luther stood firm in the midst of that. And he stood firm in his writings, too. As he did so, he reflected that he saw himself as an under-shepherd of Christ, one called to pastor the flock. And in that vein, as I was looking at the lesson for this week, I found that Luther said this: *“The true shepherd must keep watch. He must be zealous in the Word. He must give consideration to consciences, to comfort the sad, strengthen the afflicted, lest they despair, call back those who wander away... The worthless shepherds, [Christ] says, will do none of these things, because they no longer have the Word. That has been taken away from them. Both staves have been broken. But when the Word is absent, all preaching is in vain. In fact, such preaching is most harmful and (like a terrible poison) destructive to souls.”*

As we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we need those good shepherds, don't we? We need those who will guide us and speak that Word to us. We need those who will comfort the sad, strengthen the afflicted, but call back those who wander away. And of course, most of all, we need our Good Shepherd. We need the One whose Word Luther spoke about. We need that Word as we do walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We need the rod of that Law to strike us in our sin, to tell us of how we have fallen short, and how we truly deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment. But we also need the staff of His Gospel to draw us back to Him, to show us that running away in our fear of what we deserve only puts us at peril, but safety is in His flock, under His loving care. To put that concretely, safety is in the covering of His righteousness in baptism, it's in the provision and meal of His Holy Supper. It's in the hearing of His voice. As He says, **“They will listen to my voice.”** And why? Because we see that He is that Shepherd who has laid down His life for us. The Devil, the World, our own sinful natures seek to draw us away into death, into suffering, into peril. But He jumps in front of our enemies, puts Himself between them and us. I'm sure you could picture a frothing wolf seeking to devour sheep, and the shepherd putting Himself in the path of that wolf, or the pack of wolves, to prevent the harm to the sheep. And I'm sure you can imagine the harm that could come to the Shepherd in that.

And that's what we see on the cross, that's what we see on Good Friday. But on Easter we see our resurrection in His care for us. We see the truth of what He says, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”** Now as I say that, I think there are two things that are noteworthy with regard to our own understanding and application of this.

First, I think we can understand that this sacrifice isn't logical. You know, a couple of weeks ago I discussed the prevailing mindset around us and how it's losing rationality. As important as it is for us to seek to live rationally in many ways, there's a reality where God's logic isn't our own. And it's demonstrated in His generosity. I think I've pointed this out before, but you see how irrationally generous God is. I was reminded of this as I was teaching our Adult Information Class this week. We were talking about the Seventh Commandment not to steal, and as we did so I was discussing Luther's explanation. Do you all remember that? *What is the Seventh Commandment? You shall not steal. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not take our neighbors money or possessions, or get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his possessions and income.*

As I was talking about that, I was reminded of a story about someone who went to a developing country. While he was there, he went to the marketplace. Now, if you are familiar with how that often works, markets in many countries operate on the assumption that you negotiate. You ask for a price, the seller tells you one, but then you haggle. So this person, knowing the generosity that God had given him both spiritually and in terms of material blessings, asked the seller the cost. When the seller told him, he gave that much to him. The seller said, "wait, no! You don't need to do that!" But the person said he did. Why? Because of God's generosity to Him.

And you see that in this description. You see it in the shepherd laying down His life for His sheep. That doesn't make sense, right? The human laying down his life for the animal? And you see it in other illustrations the Lord speaks too. Like the parable of the sower, the sower is ridiculous to be so wasteful as to cast seed on the ground where it's not going to grow. Or there's the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan risks his life to help the wounded man. He then gives generously toward the man's care. And they were strangers! So, Christ's generosity to you!

So that's the first application, is understanding just how generous to you this Good Shepherd has been. The second, I think fits really well into our current climate. I've spoken a bit over the past few weeks about the sort of prevailing philosophies around us. We've also talked specifically about something called Critical Theory in Bible Class. Now these philosophies, especially Critical Theory have at their understanding that everything breaks down to power. There are those in power who oppress those who aren't in power. In our time this gets broken down especially in view of categories like race, gender, sexual identity, etc. What groups have historically had means are seen as those who also have had power and so have oppressed those who don't. And of course, there is truth in that we as people are cruel in our sin. We

seek to grab and grab for ourselves. But the understanding is that this power needs to shift hands. Think about how good it is for us to hear of this Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the Sheep. Think about what this tells us about power and about authority.

To go back to something I've brought up fairly regularly, I was teaching my class for Concordia last week. In the class we were talking about vocation and how our roles in so many aspects of life are determined by Fourth Commandment relationships. Now if you're remembering which is the Fourth Commandment, that's to honor your Father and Mother. But if you remember your confirmation teaching, you remember that's not just about your parents. No, it tells us about authority relationships altogether. In fact, understood properly, it tells us about how authority is properly used.

So, to make that point, I read Ephesians 5:20-6:9 with the class. If you know that, that's the passage where Paul tells wives to be submissive to their husbands. Of course, that's anathema in our day. But I always try to make the point that we don't get it. I was making that point, when one of the students asked—and understandably— “Don't we have to acknowledge that there is some sexism here?” And I said, “That's exactly it! We think there is because we think that the call to submit is a call to be oppressed. And we think that because we think it's all about giving men power. But look at what the men are called to do: ‘Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.’ If we understand that, we see that authority isn't about a power grab, it's about love and sacrifice and service.”

That's what our Good Shepherd shows us. Power isn't about serving oneself. Authority isn't about serving oneself. No, it's about laying down one's life for those under his care. That's the second application. In our day, we need to understand power for it's proper use, the use our God Himself shows us in Christ.

So, as we see our Good Shepherd, carry that into the world. Carry that message of sacrifice, of generosity. Carry that message of the Good Shepherd who gave Himself for you. And know that voice of the Shepherd who tells and promises you of this love that He has for you.

As we reflect on those events Five Hundred years ago, what we see is that under-shepherd Luther understood that. That's why he had to stand on that Word. That's why he couldn't go against his conscience. May our God bless us with that same steadfastness. But may He do so in that same knowledge. That knowledge that this Christ is that Good Shepherd who lay down His life for us, for you. Amen.