



THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD!

MISERCORDIAS DOMINI SUNDAY

29 APRIL ANNO DOMINI 2012

REV. STEVEN D. SPENCER

JOHN 10:11-18 & 1 John 3:16-24

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen!

The most gentle and comforting of all the images of Jesus in the Scriptures is one of the Good Shepherd. The old Latin name for Good Shepherd Sunday is Misericordias Domini – the merciful heart of the Lord. David, the shepherd-king, David wrote that wonderful 23rd psalm as inspired by the Holy Spirit. He was a sheep boasting of his shepherd: ***“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”***

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a shepherd’s town, the birthplace of His ancestor the shepherd-king, David. The first to worship Jesus were shepherds of the field from Bethlehem. Though Jesus grew up as a carpenter’s son, shepherding was His far greater vocation.

The Good Shepherd literally lays down His life for the sheep. His sheep are His life. He brings them out to green pasture. He leads them to fresh pools of water. He sets them upright when they’ve fallen down and can’t lift themselves up. He leads them on paths through places where sheep naturally will not go, the dark valleys where predators abound. Where the good shepherd leads, the sheep will follow in total trust. He feeds them, He anoints their wounds and sores, He cares for them and He pampers them. At night, after the flock is safely tucked in their pen, the good shepherd lays down at the entrance to become the door. If anyone wants to get to the sheep, they’ll have to get through the good shepherd first, literally over his dead body.

The good shepherd stands in sharp contrast to the hired hand that runs off at the first sign of danger. For the hireling, it’s just a job and a paycheck. He cares nothing about the sheep. But for the shepherd, the sheep are not only his livelihood, they are his life. They are his own for they are family. He calls each of them by name, even as we do our pets, and they hear his voice and follow him. That’s what Jesus is and does for us. He lays down His life for the world and in particular, for you.

To say Jesus is our good shepherd is also to say that ***“we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.”*** This may prove troublesome for our egos. While it’s nice to think of Jesus as the good shepherd, we might desire something a bit more glamorous for ourselves than the image of a sheep. Sheep are stubborn, often mean, and prone to wandering. The prophet Isaiah says it this way, ***“All we like sheep have gone astray, everyone has turned to his own way.”*** We don’t naturally like to stay close to the flock.

Sheep are prone to straying, so are we. We’ll drink from any rancid, polluted pool that promises refreshment – the pools of religions, philosophies, self-help fads. We’ll sample any weed in the pasture that looks tasty, no matter how toxic it might be. We’ll wander off on our own, thinking we can do it all alone. Just me and God, thank you very much! Who needs all the difficulties of congregational and community life when you can go it alone? Remember, the lone sheep is an easy meal for the wolf.

Our wandering rebelliousness comes from the original itch of wanting to be gods in place of God, sticking our hand into the middle of the forbidden tree to pluck fruit that brought death instead of life. We want to do it our way and not God’s way. You and I have that same inborn tendency, and it manifests itself in our spiritual restlessness, our boredom, our continual desire to be flock hopping from one church to another, our itch for the novel and exciting over those well-worn ruts of righteousness that lead to eternal life. Left on our own we’d be dead sheep, devoured by the wolves and carrions.

When I was growing we would spend summers at my grandparents. They owned an orange grove. Right next to their farm was a ranch. The farmer raised cattle and sheep in the same field. Every couple days the rancher would show up and throw hay into the feeding stalls for the cattle. Cattle are low maintenance. The sheep on the other hand required the rancher to get into the field and physically lead the sheep to the food. They don’t even tend to know when they are in peril, that’s why you need a sheep dog to warn them. Sheep are high

maintenance – prone to wandering, requiring constant attention. A rancher doesn't need to hang out much with his cattle, not in the way a shepherd does. A shepherd gets right down there and joins the flock. He becomes one of the sheep. They think of him as one of their own.

Had the Son of God not joined the flock by becoming man, we would be doomed by our own sin and death. But this is the merciful heart of the Lord the Misericordias Domini. He became one of us. The Word became flesh and pitched the tabernacle of His flesh among us, the way a shepherd dwells among his flock. He didn't sit there on a throne in heaven somewhere saying, "They sure look lost; I hope they find me." The Good Shepherd joined us, His flock. He laid down His life by being lifted up on a cross, He gathered all to Himself, a sinful, damned humanity, in the embrace of a loving shepherd God who is willing to lay down His life, to suffer and die to save us who were His enemy.

The Lord is your Good Shepherd. He pastures you in the green pastures of His Word; He leads you to the quiet waters of Baptism; He restores your soul, lifting you from death to life in Him. He guides you in the well-worn ruts of righteousness, the way of repentance, daily dying and rising, for His name's sake. Though daily you walk through the dark valley called the "Shadow of Death," where threats to your life surround you, where death and the grave loom large, you need fear no evil. Fear not, little Flock. Good Shepherd Jesus has gone ahead of you through suffering and death to resurrection and glory. Your Shepherd lives and in Him you live also. The grave couldn't hold Him, and it can't hold you either.

He is with you, comforting you with His Word and presence; the rod of His Law, the staff of His Gospel always assuring you of His presence. He prepares a banquet table for you, the gifts of His sacrifice, His own Body and Blood which He offered up once for all right there in the presence of your enemies – sin, death, and the devil. Nothing can harm you. ***"There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."***

That love that lays down its life has an effect on the sheep also. They take on the character of their shepherd. He is so much a part of them and their lives that the sheep reflect that same: "lay down their life type of love toward each other". Without their shepherd, they would be busy butting heads, competing, struggling for their own survival. Without Jesus, you are isolated sheep turned inward. But something marvelous happens when that lay-down-its-life love of Jesus has its way with you. You become like Him.

John writes about it. ***"By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."*** The love that flows from the merciful heart of the Lord overflows to the brother, to the sister, to your fellow Christian who shares the same baptismal birth, the same Body and Blood, the same forgiveness, the same Jesus. ***"I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was a stranger and you welcomed me."*** The sheep see the Shepherd in each other, and they reflect the Good Shepherd to one another.

Luther said we are as little Christ to one another in all the little ways we lay down our lives for each other. It might be helping a young mother with her fidgeting child so she can hear the sermon all the way through, helping a family who can't make financial ends meet, teaching a Sunday school class so that the children can learn the Bible and the catechism, counseling someone in despair, visiting or calling on someone who is homebound or sick. There are countless little ways to lay down our lives because we know that love of Jesus who laid down His life for us. We live as little reflections of Jesus to each other. And we see Jesus in each other. ***"As often as you have done it to the least of these, my brothers, you have done it to me."*** We serve Christ in the other, and we are as Christ for the other.

This is what impressed the culture surrounding of the early church. Not Christianity's impressive doctrines; not its glorious worship; not its magnificent buildings and programs. But this very simple observation that set the Christian apart from the rest of the dog eat dog world. ***"See how they love one another."*** It was their love, an alien, strange sort of love – unselfish, self-sacrificing, laying down its life like a shepherd with his sheep. The world saw something different in the way Christians dealt with each other, and they actively wondered and sought out what made them tick. Why would people love one another in this way?

I have to wonder today amidst all the reports of declining church attendance, lack of interest in Christianity, apathy from our own baptized youth who often abandon the faith as soon as they are confirmed, whether it's because that self-sacrificing love is no longer readily apparent. James reminds us that the world cannot see faith; it can only see faith's love. John says the same thing. One of his churches, the main congregation in Ephesus, was known for its pure doctrine, its patient endurance, and its rejection of all heresies. But by the close of the first century, the Lord had this to say about the church in Ephesus: ***“You have abandoned your former love. Repent.” “If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?”***

This is God's mandate, not simply that we believe in the name of the Son of God Jesus Christ, but that we love one another. Jesus said so when He bent down to wash the feet of His disciples and told them the world will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. And if that causes you a bit of unrest this morning, then good! If your hearts are condemned then repent and turn to God; He is greater than your heart, and He knows everything. Let His love turn you inside out again and take that step of love in confidence. You cannot fail; He won't let you. Try it. Dare to love as you have been loved. While faith in Christ is always whole and complete, love is always one little step at a time,

You are the sheep of the Good Shepherd's flock. Your Baptism marks you as one of His own. You were bought with a price, the blood of Jesus. You are precious to Him. There is not a day that goodness and mercy does not flow from the merciful heart of the Lord to you. Oh, you may not always feel as though it is so, but it is for the Lord has promised. He will not leave you like a hired hand. He is your good shepherd, who laid down His life for you. And at the end of it all, there is a promise held in trust that is as sure as Jesus crucified and risen from the dead: You shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever, for in Him alone there is life.

For in Christ Jesus all your sins have been forgiven, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In the name of Good Shepherd Jesus Christ, Amen and Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN!