

April 21, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday)
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

1 John 3:16–24 (John 10:11–18)

WE OUGHT TO LAY DOWN OUR LIVES FOR THE BROTHERS.

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

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter our Gospel reading is a portion of the tenth chapter of St. John’s Gospel – which is known as the Good Shepherd chapter.

Scripture figuratively refers of God’s people as sheep. (cf: Psalm 95:7, 100:3; Isaiah 53:6; Ezekiel 34:1–31) It’s not an enduring comparison. While it is the nature of sheep to be gentle and submissive, they’re also vulnerable and defenseless to predators. They have no sense of direction. Where one goes the next will follow. They’re very dependent on the shepherd. So too, you and I are nothing more than sheep – like sheep, we have all gone astray. (cf: Isaiah 53:6) You wander away from God and go your own way. You don’t keep His commandments and abide in Him as you ought. You daily sin much and deserve nothing but eternal punishment. You need a Savior, a Good Shepherd who will protect and keep you from the dangers prowling about in this darkened world, to keep you from being a danger to yourselves, and to keep you pointed in the right direction, leading you into green pastures, beside still waters, and rescue you from sin, death, and the grave.

In today’s Gospel text, Jesus says:

“I am the good shepherd...” (John 10:11)

The words ***“I AM”*** is the personal name of God that He called Himself to Moses out of the burning bush. (cf: Exodus 3:14) Jewish people of Jesus’ day knew all about God calling Himself ***Yahweh*** to Moses, so they know that Jesus isn’t speaking merely of a metaphorical Good Shepherd, but is saying that He is ***Yahweh***, the one, true, and authentic ***Shepherd*** of whom the Scriptures have foretold. (cf: Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:15) He’s the one and only perfect Good Shepherd. Accept no substitutes. When He says:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
(John 10:11)

... He is revealing His divine identity as God in the flesh of man who has entered creation to lay down His life to save mankind from their sins.

And Jesus doesn’t just talk the talk. He walks the walk! The King of love your Shepherd is. It took far more than three long nails to hold Him to the cross. It took love.

“... God shows his love for [you] in that while [you] were still sinners, Christ died for [you].” (Romans 5:7–8)

Jesus Himself said:

“Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” (John 15:13)

An ordinary shepherd might die in defense of his flock, but that wouldn't benefit his flock because after he was dead, the rest of the flock would become helpless prey. Your Good Shepherd, however, became a sheep for you. He's the very Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by laying down His life as the blood-sacrifice for His sheep on the altar of the cross.

Every other sheep that died a sacrificial death in history had no choice in the matter. Those sheep were never heard from again. Yet your Good Shepherd not only willingly laid down His life as the perfect and complete blood-sacrifice to pay the wages of the sin of all mankind who otherwise deserve eternal damnation, He takes His life up again by His resurrection from the dead, assuring you that God approved of His atoning sacrifice. It's a promise of your resurrection on the Last Day.

You became of member of God's one true flock under the one Good Shepherd either in Baptism or the hearing of the Gospel. The Good Shepherd knows you and you know Him, just as the Father knows Him and He knows the Father. God is love:

“... not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

[point to the crucifix] Greater love has no one than this. It's self-sacrificial love... love that's put into action to take care of your greatest need, to make peace between God and you by perfectly keeping His commandments, abiding perfectly in the Father's love, and being the perfect sacrificial atonement, not only for your sins, but also for the sins of the whole world. (cf: 1 John 2:2) It's something that you couldn't do in a million years.

[point to the crucifix] Greater love has no one than this. Through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus, He has forgiven all your sins of going astray, not keeping His commands and abiding in His love as you ought. He has swallowed up death forever. (cf: Isaiah 25:8) Just as death can no longer harm Christ, it cannot ***permanently*** harm you.

In Baptism, God has transferred all the benefits of Christ's death to you. Through your Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, He has given you the victory over sin, death, and the grave. (1 Corinthians 15:57) Even though you daily walk through the valley of the shadow of death, (cf: Psalm 23:4) you have nothing to fear. The Good Shepherd, who has already been through death and the grave, leads you through this life and death, unto life everlasting. To everyone who hears Jesus' Word and believes in the One who sent Him:

“... he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24)

Then, just as sure as Christ has been raised from the dead, on the Last Day at His return He will raise up your mortal body to put on immortality. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:53)

Jesus not only talks the talk and walks the walk. In our Epistle lesson, St. John exhorts you, dear baptized believer, to respond to the love which Christ has for you, by doing likewise for your brothers, as He writes:

***"¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But 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? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."* (1 John 3:16–18)**

Indeed, Scripture teaches that God's grace, the forgiveness of sin, righteousness, and salvation, comes not by your works, but through your God given gift of faith. (cf: Ephesians 2:8–9) But too often, become complacent sheep. We listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, but we don't respond appropriately by living as sheep of His flock. We talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Actions speak louder than words, and lip-service is not love. We don't practice acts of love and righteousness toward our brothers and sisters in Christ as we ought.

I'm guilty too. And sometimes don't rightly proclaim the whole council of God's Word of the believer's proper response to God's love. It's easy to preach the Law, saying what poor, miserable sinners we all are, failing to keep God's commands. And then preach the Gospel, saying that the Good Shepherd laid down His life for you anyway and your sins are forgiven. Amen! And send you on your way. But that's skipping biblical exhortation... skipping the biblical encouragement that our Lord desires that you, fellow believers, live lives worthy of the Christian name... performing the good works and deeds and acts of righteousness which God has prepared in advance that you should walk in them. (cf: Ephesians 2:10)

We always talk about loving our neighbor as ourselves, but talk is cheap! Lip-service doesn't provide food or warm clothing. Unless your talk about love is backed up by real deeds, by acts which provide the assistance that your brother needs, your talk of love is hypocrisy. What does it mean to love? Imitate Christ. (cf: 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6) Because the sinless Good Shepherd laid down His life to save you from sin, death, and the grave, you ***ought*** to lovingly respond by laying down your lives for your brother and sister believers. Concordia Commentary author Bruce Schuchard writes:

"Characteristically, [the words] "we ought to" [in verse 16 of our epistle text] has for John to do with "an obligation based on the example of Jesus" (see Jn 13:14 and 1 Jn 2:6; cf. 4:11). Therefore, that we are in fellowship with him means that we are like him (3:1–2); that we are like him means that, as he gave of himself for us, so we give of ourselves for one another, living and loving in the imprint of his grace.²⁸⁵ Fellowship with him means Christlike foot-service in fellowship with "one another" (3:23c)." (Schuchard, 1–3 John, Concordia Commentary, 383)

Of course, thankfully, not many of us are called to literally lay down our lives in some deed of heroism, but each of us has daily opportunities to share our physical assistance and possessions with those in need, not to mention sharing the life-saving Gospel news of the Good Shepherd. (cf. James 2:15–16) In Baptism, you're a new creation in Christ, regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit. (2 Corinthians 5:17; Titus 3:5–6) You know love, so now you're enabled to share that love with others... the self-sacrificial kind of love that lays down its life for your brothers.

It's not just a warm and fuzzy feeling. It's walking the walk, aligning your life and actions by loving others in deed and in truth. That's what Jesus did when He laid down His life for you. So that's what you and I Christians do in response to the love of Him who first loved us – we lay down our lives for the brothers in deed and in truth.

The love that lays down its life happens like this: you see a brother in need, in whatever kind of need he has, and you help him, in whatever way you can. You put your love into action. This Christ-like love takes the initiative physically in labor, financially in dollars, and materially in goods – loving others with the abundant gifts that God has given you. It might be helping you brothers and sisters right here in our own congregation, or it might be sending assistance to brothers and sisters halfway around the world, fellow Christians in places where poverty or persecution have taken their toll.

St. John is giving us a template for living the Christian life. Can you and I live it perfectly? Of course not. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. It's God's good and holy will for your life. St. John sums it up like this:

"²³ And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴ Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us." (1 John 3:23–24)

First, ***"Believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ."*** You were given faith and the Holy Spirit in Baptism – and the object of your faith is the name of Jesus, for there's salvation in no one else. (cf: Acts 4:12) Regenerated and renewed by the Holy Spirit, you are enabled to believe in the name of Jesus – the name which not only describes who He is as Savior, it also stands also for His character and authority. Second, the Holy Spirit enables you to ***"love one another."*** The love with the love with which you lay down your life for, and serve your brother. It's the love you put into action when you serve your neighbor. Believe in Christ. Love one another. That's it. That's the Christian life in a nutshell.

And God equips you and He strengthens you to live that kind of love. He does it through His Word and Sacrament that He gives you here in the Divine Service. He equips and strengthens your faith in His Absolution and forgives of your sins. He equips you in the hearing of the Gospel message of the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for you, and in the eating and drinking of His body and blood, given and shed for you on the altar of the cross.

"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13)

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.