

Misericordias Domini
St. John 10:11-16

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep."

Of course He's good; He's God, and that makes Him good. But what makes Jesus the good shepherd? Precisely that second sentence: "The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep."

This is an excellent text for the season of Easter. Sure, it happens well before Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus even says this before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. However, in this text, Jesus illustrates what makes Him, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. John 1:29), the good shepherd, and that is what makes it an excellent text for this season.

Jesus is your good shepherd, which makes you one of His sheep. As shepherd, Jesus cares for you, gives you what you need, and makes sure that you don't wander from the fold. And you, as one of His sheep, find ways to get into exactly what you don't need, and in fact, that which is the exact opposite of what you need. It would kill you if not for the actions of Jesus, your shepherd. And you, as one of His sheep, have the propensity to wander off and into places and situations where you shouldn't be because they are dangerous for your well-being. And in those times when you get into what kills you or wander off, Jesus is the one who finds you and restores you, making you one of His sheep again.

The thing is, He could do none of those things simply as a shepherd. He does all of that, and more, because He is the good shepherd. "The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep." He lays it down and takes it back up again. (cf. John 10:17) You, dear sheep, are baptized into His laying down His life and taking it up again. (cf. Romans 6:3-6) And by way of this baptism into His death and resurrection, you are made one of His sheep, brought into His fold, the church where you receive His life to conquer your death, the forgiveness of all of your sins, and salvation in the kingdom of God. Without His death and resurrection, you would have none of these things, and your faith in Him would be in vain. (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:13-17)

Without Jesus giving His life for the sheep, He is just a shepherd—an ordinary shepherd—and little different than the hireling. The man in the pulpit is such an ordinary shepherd—a hireling who doesn't own the sheep. Watch out for him, dear sheep. He may say that he is willing to lay down his life for the sheep, and perhaps for a time or for a few of you, he would most certainly be willing to do so, but when push comes to shove, his willingness would most likely be overcome by his weak flesh. (cf. Matthew 26:41) Like the hireling, then, he will leave the sheep and flee when that dangerous wolf comes. The sheep are left to the wolf, who scatters them.

You see this when the wolf came upon Jesus during His passion. That wolf in sheep's clothing, Judas, leads the temple guards to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. After a verbal confrontation and the loss of a guard's ear, Jesus is captured and bound, and the disciples scatter. This is just as it was written by the prophet Zechariah: "'Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, Against the Man who is My Companion,' Says the LORD of hosts. 'Strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered; Then I will turn My hand against the little ones.'" (Zechariah 13:7) Jesus also reminded them of this before His passion. (cf. Matthew 26:31) You might remember the special attention Peter needed when Jesus reminded them.

But the Shepherd of Zechariah—the good shepherd, as Jesus rightly calls Himself—is the one who gets struck. He doesn't flee the wolf, but is willingly captured, put on trial, struck, and ultimately killed on a cross. He does so for the sheep. Jesus, though He was equal to God in all respects—He is God—did not consider that equality as something to be grasped, but humbled Himself to the point of death, the death of the cross. (cf. Philippians 2:5-8) He knew the sheep needed a shepherd like this, a good

shepherd who would do this for the sheep. So, God places Himself in the path of the wolf, and the sheep are spared. God becomes the shepherd of His own people, just as He promised:

"As I live," says the Lord GOD, "surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock became food for every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock"—"Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall feed themselves no more; for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them." For thus says the Lord GOD: "Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down," says the Lord GOD. "I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy the fat and the strong, and feed them in judgment." "I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd." (Ezekiel 34:8, 10-16, 23)

What great love, that God would sacrifice Himself to the wolf and die for His sheep. "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." (John 15:13)

The Shepherd is struck, and the sheep scatter. Isn't it ironic that these sheep, Jesus' disciples, are the ones scattering? These are the men that Jesus hand picked to bring His message of salvation—to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in His name—and when the wolf comes for the good shepherd, they scatter. Are they hirelings? Well, when they are at work in the church doing the work for which they were sent, they certainly don't own the sheep.

And so it is also with the man in the pulpit this morning. His only claim on you is that you are the ones through whom Jesus called him to this place. That's enough to give him the will to lay down his life for you. Jesus placed him here as His own under shepherd, and since his call is divine, he is willing to give his life for you, but you sheep do not belong to him; you are sheep of the good shepherd. He is willing to die for you, like Peter and Thomas were willing to die for Jesus (cf. Matthew 26:33; John 11:16), but like the disciples the night on which Jesus was betrayed, his flesh is weak.

Now, this indictment against the shepherd in the pulpit is also an indictment against the sheep. As much as you are sheep in this place, the man is, likewise, a sheep of the good shepherd—he bears the same weak flesh with which you are afflicted. So, try as you might to confess that you would rather die with Jesus than flee when the going gets tough—or to put it in a way that may be more pertinent, to confess Him before men in any and every situation in life, even to the point of death, as you have confessed to do so when you were confirmed—the spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is weak, and your confession will waver. How does Jesus' warning go, again? "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10:32-33)

In light of that, remember, dear Baptized, that you are sheep of the good shepherd. You are ones for whom Jesus has thrown Himself to the wolf. The wolf seeks to devour you because of your sin

—that wolf is the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh. Your weak flesh and lack of confession are but only a part of that for which Jesus has died. His love covers a multitude of sins (cf. 1 Peter 4:8), a love that He expressed by laying down His life for you. That multitude, dear hearers, is every single last one of them.

The disciples scattered when their Shepherd was struck, but Jesus restored them. He sent them out to declare this restoration in His blood to the nations, and it is the same message of restoration that you hear week in and week out in this place. Peter three times denied knowing Jesus, having denied that He would scatter. Jesus told him that he would sin, but He forgave the man who would eventually tell a large crowd in Jerusalem, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38) It's the same message of repentance and forgiveness that you receive week in and week out in this place. Thomas wouldn't believe that Jesus was risen from the dead unless he saw Him for himself. Jesus appeared to the 11, and told Thomas to touch His holy wounds and not be unbelieving but believing. His doubt was turned to faith, and he confessed Jesus as his Lord and God. It's the same thing that happens to you as you receive Holy Absolution and Holy Communion, which give, restore, and strengthen your faith to confess Jesus as your Lord and God.

Dear Baptized, you are redeemed, bought back from life to death by the death and resurrection of your good shepherd, Jesus Christ. He daily and richly restores you to faith in Him by the forgiveness that He won for you on the cross and sealed to you by His empty tomb. This is the great love of the good shepherd for you. Dear hearers, God's love for you compelled Him to die in your place. You are a wandering sheep, but Jesus is your good shepherd. He has laid down His life for you and taken it back up again that you would reap the reward that He has earned for you: life, salvation, and the forgiveness for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.