

John 10:1-10

We have two stained-glass windows up on the wall behind me. Which one would you choose as being the best symbol for this day in the Church Year—Good Shepherd Sunday? Perhaps the one to my right...which shows Jesus carrying one of His little sheep? A wonderful picture, and one that we all hold dear to our hearts. But I would choose the other one, because Jesus on the cross is the reason why He is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is good precisely because He lays down His life for the sheep. It is through His crucifixion that our Good Shepherd leads us into heaven's pastures. It's not because He scratches us behind our ears and cuddles us warmly to His breast, that has made this Man from Nazareth our Shepherd. His death and resurrection have done that. The Good Shepherd is good, not because He is kind and cuddly, but because He dies for the sheep and rises again.

And since Jesus is the Good Shepherd...that makes you a sheep. And that's not exactly a flattering image. Sheep are slow. They're nearly blind. And they're not very bright. But sheep are unique in one way—they have almost the best hearing of any animal. And with that hearing, a little sheep has, also, the ability to recognize its own mother's bleating among a hundred others.

When Jesus calls you a sheep He is not insulting you. He is wanting you to understand how dependant you are. Sheep have no ability at all to defend themselves. And so, shepherds in the Holy Land would keep their sheep inside walled sheep pens at night. High walls on every side, with sharp objects on top so that thieves would have great difficulty climbing over. And at one place, in one of the walls, was an opening—slightly wider than the width of a man. As the sheep came in at night, the shepherd would stand in that opening, and when satisfied that everything was fine, he would turn his body sideways to let the sheep pass. The shepherd literally became the "gate" to the sheep pen. And that's Jesus. "I am the Door—the Gate." He says. "Whoever enters through Me will be saved."

Have you ever noticed how many doors are constructed? We often see doors made up of four panels—two upper panels and two lower panels. And the wood molding which separates the panels is in the shape of a cross. This is no coincidence. In the Middle Ages, the Carpenter's Guild selected the cross as their symbol, and the verse, "I am the Door," as their motto. They, then, deliberately built the cross into every single door they constructed.

Jesus is the Door for the sheep because He laid down His life upon the cross. And only those pastors, therefore, that faithfully preach the cross of Jesus are His true undershepherds of the sheep. "The thief comes only to kill, and steel, and destroy," Jesus says. "The thief does not enter in by the door, but he climbs in by some other way." And there are plenty of thieves among us.

But you can tell the voice of a thief. The thief is a stranger to you. When he calls, you do not recognize the voice of your Shepherd, for the thief does not preach the cross. He may tell you that your good works will lead you into the door of everlasting life; that God will reward your efforts and grant you a place in heaven; that the cross is fine and good, but you must add this and that to it. He may tell you that you must make a decision to accept Christ into your heart. You've seen the commercials on television—"God is there for you, if only you will call on Him," says the smiling pastor. "Receive Jesus!" But that's not the cross.

That's preaching your works—what you must do—your efforts; not what Christ did for you on the cross. It's not we who receive Jesus, it's Jesus who receives us. It's not we who bring Him to us by calling on Him—He calls us to Himself in the water and Word.

The thief will not point you to your baptism. He will not proclaim the Lord's Supper as a great and wonderful treasure. Rather, he will tell you to find Jesus in your own heart—in your own decision—in your own personal prayers; in places that sound good...they sound believable...it's so tempting to run after that voice. But Jesus says that he is a thief who comes to destroy, because he does not enter by the door—and the door is the door of the cross.

We will not find Jesus' cross in our heart; nor in our prayers; nor in our works and decisions. Jesus has placed His cross in Holy Baptism, and in His Holy Supper. It is within His Word of Forgiveness. It is in these holy things that we receive the benefits of our Lord's death and resurrection. In Baptism your sins are cleansed. In the Word proclaimed Jesus forgives you. At His Table your Savior gives you the sweet taste of His forgiveness. We don't look for the cross in our efforts, or somewhere inside of us. We see the cross in the Word and Sacraments. And where the cross is, there is the Door to the sheep pen; there is your Shepherd; there is forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The faithful undershepherd reminds you to make the sign of the cross and repeat the words spoken at your baptism. It was there that you first heard the loving voice of your Good Shepherd. That voice has sunk deeply into your heart and mind through the liturgy of the church; the hymns; the preaching of the Word. Your father and mother, as they taught you at home the Word of Christ, and brought you with them here to God's House, echoed the voice of the Good Shepherd in your youth. And still today you hear and know that voice proclaimed to you by the one whose vocal chords are wrapped in a white collar to remind him that he is to preach Christ, and none other.

The faithful undershepherd is not to say what he thinks is best. He is in your midst for the sole purpose of showing you the Door to the sheep pen—he is to let you see Jesus. He is to lead you always to Him who laid down His life for the sheep.

But friend, we sinful sheep often go astray, and we do not want to be led. We want our freedoms. We do not want a faithful undershepherd. We want one who will scratch our itching ears and tell us only what we want to hear. We don't want to lie down in the green pastures of the Word of God. We want to lie down in the bed of our neighbor's spouse. We don't want to confess that our wool has become blackened with sin. We like to hear how good we are and think badly of the "black sheep" of the family.

Remember who you are. You are one of Jesus' sheep. He did not die for you so that you could lead a life of sin. He did not go to the cross for you and die your death there so that thieves could steal you away from Him and the life He gives. Your Good Shepherd desires you, and all He wants is you. "Me...who so often ignores my Shepherd and the other sheep in His flock?" Yes, you. "Me...who has spurned His grace, ignored His call, and gone my own sinful way?" Yes, you. "Me...who has lived so selfishly that I don't even deserve to be called His sheep?" Yes, you.

Friend, you are Jesus' sheep not because of how you live. You are Jesus' sheep because in Holy Baptism He has made you His forgiven sheep. When you gaze upon that picture of the Good Shepherd holding a little sheep...if you wonder, "Is that me? Am I really one of Jesus' beloved sheep?"—then turn your eyes and gaze upon the other picture, of Christ on the cross. That is where your sins have been laid. That is your Shepherd dying for you. He did that to give you life—abundant life. And that life belongs to you, because you, my friend, are one of Jesus' sheep. Amen.