

John 10:14,15b

“I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me, and I lay down My life for the sheep.” (Introit)

No one enjoys being insulted...us included. We prefer compliments to “put-downs.” We tend to react negatively when we sense that others are saying things which make us look bad. Were your ears tingling as I read our text? They should have been because you and I were being insulted, and by no one less than Jesus Himself. He called us sheep. Maybe not directly, but that is the definite implication here in John 10. If we’re His followers, then you and I are sheep.

What’s so bad about that? Well for one thing, sheep are stupid; and that’s an insult in my book. Sheep are defenseless. They easily become distracted and wander off from their shepherd. They become lost and are easy prey for wolves and other predators. Sheep really don’t know how to do anything for themselves. They need constant care. They need a shepherd to watch over them always. So, are you feeling insulted yet?

I’m not even sure how useful sheep are anymore. Here in Missouri we don’t rush off to the store when mutton goes on sale. We eat beef, pork, and chicken. We may wear some wool, but most of our clothing is made of cotton or polyester blends. So what good is a sheep? What good are we?

Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter (Good Shepherd Sunday), we are reminded of these things. It’s a humbling thing to come to church and be told, “Oh yes, don’t forget you’re nothing but a stupid sheep.” We need this reminder because it is our nature, as sheep of course, to think rather highly of ourselves. For one thing, we resent the idea that we need constant care. We sheep like to think that we can care for ourselves just fine. We don’t need a shepherd watching over us 24/7. We don’t need him to lead us to green pastures; to give us water to drink; to fend off our enemies. We sheep have the idea that as long as our shepherd is somewhere, we’ll find him if we ever need him. But most of the time we’re okay on our own.

Do you doubt these words? Then why is it that here in America three-fourths of all Christians make it a habit of not going to church on Sunday mornings? Why is it that you and I don’t make it a habit of reading the Word of God daily? Why is it that when our Good Shepherd comes with His life for us in the Sacrament, we wonder if we really need to go up to His altar? It’s because we’re sheep, and sheep by nature, prefer to “shepherd” themselves.

But the truth is that sheep cannot even eat and drink without their shepherd. A shepherd in the Holy Land needs to prepare the table for his sheep. He gets rid of all the thistles and thorns which would prick the sheep’s mouth causing it to bleed and become infected. Sheep would fall into a moving stream of water, their thick wool would become soaked and the weight would pull them down under the water and they would drown. The shepherd, therefore, needs to dig a trench at a right-angle from the stream so the sheep can drink in safety.

You and I are sheep. Without our Good Shepherd we could not eat and drink the food of salvation. We sheep think that knowledge in the head is good enough, but our Shepherd,

Jesus, knows that He must feed us His living words of life over and over into our ears. And He must give us to drink His cup of salvation again and again. If we who are sheep can get along fine without Him, then why does our Good Shepherd come here for us week after week? Why does He speak to us day after day from the pages of His Word? It's because as our Shepherd, He knows what we need. He knows that apart from Him we can do nothing.

Jesus knows that you and I are defenseless sheep, and He also knows that our enemy would love to devour us. In the Holy Land a sheep that wanders away from its shepherd will eventually die. It will starve or be killed by a ravenous wolf. To wander away from Jesus is to lay aside our Bible and catechism; to neglect the habit of worshipping on Sunday mornings; to stay away from His Table of Grace. Sheep do not go through life on their own; they live with a flock. To leave the other sheep of the flock, and thus wander away from the shepherd, is deadly to the sheep. But you can't convince a sheep of that. It sees no harm in looking for greener pastures on its own. It sees no danger in straying from the flock.

We must stay with our Shepherd. This means we stay with the flock. We must not forsake our assembling together where Jesus comes to feed us and care for us. You and I are prone to wander. It is in our nature as sheep. We do not see our enemy, Satan. We think that no harm will come to us if we take time away from God's House and Word. We think we're still a part of the flock even though we fail to gather with other Christians around Christ's Word and Sacraments.

How wonderful for us that we have, not just a shepherd, but a Good Shepherd. "I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus, "I know My own and My own know Me, and I lay down My life for the sheep." Maybe it's not such an insult to be called a sheep, because for the sheep, Jesus died. He didn't die for you because you are good and decent sheep. He died for you because you are sinful sheep; because, as a sheep, you like to stray; you like to be your own "shepherd." Jesus didn't die for you because you were useful. He didn't die for you so that you would become useful. Your Good Shepherd laid down His life on the cross for you because He loved you. Even if you don't feel lovable; even if you feel worthless; He gave His life's blood for you.

And He then brought you to the quiet waters of Holy Baptism where He called you by name. You are Jesus' sheep. It's okay that we're stupid, worthless, defenseless, and all that. Your Savior loves you. He forgives you for all your disobedience toward Him. Through some of you, Jesus works to maintain His flock here in Augusta. Through some of you, Jesus works to cause His flock to grow. But what Jesus does for all of you, and what is most precious to Him, is He feeds you His words of life; He gives you His overflowing cup to drink.

Jesus doesn't despise any of His sheep. He forgives each one of you. He calls to each one of you to follow Him; to stay with Him; to stay with His flock. He didn't lay down His life for nothing. He laid it down for you—so that He is the One leading you through life; so that He may lead you even in the valley of the shadow of death; and so that He may give you a place with Him in the House of the Lord forever. Knowing this...believing this, with Jesus as our Good Shepherd, isn't it good to be a sheep—to be Jesus' sheep? Amen.