

John 10:11-18

An empty chair at the dinner table can mean one of several things. It can mean that a member of the family is sick in bed and unable to join the others at the table. It can mean that a child has grown up and is away at college, or has moved away, has their own family and now has a dinner table of their own. It can mean that a family member who once occupied that chair at the table has fallen asleep in Jesus and now sits at the banquet feast in heaven with all the saints who have gone before us. All of us have empty chairs at our dinner table, and if we do not, we will in due time. But even when chairs are empty, the same meals are brought to the table. The food is served even if only one chair is filled.

The same is true here in church. The empty pews that are here on Sunday mornings have stories to tell, and not all are sad stories. Yes, empty pews do tell us of those who could come and sit with us at the dinner table, but choose not to come. But some of these are sick, or even in the hospital. Others are away at college. Still others have moved away. They have relocated, and now fill the pews, the seats, of another dinner table. Some of our empty pews tell us of those who are with us in spirit even though they are not physically present. They live now in care centers, nursing homes. They are not forgotten. Not only do we remember them in our prayers; we remember the pews in which they sat, where they ate the same spiritual food with us.

And there are empty pews which tell us the story of those who are with us in Christ, but now sit with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven. For years, decades even, many of these dear family members sat right here with us enjoying the foretaste of the feast to come. The dinner conversation here with them was always of Christ. And even though their pews now sit empty, and yes, we miss them, even with tears, we know that in Christ we are still with them, and they with us, and we shall, by persevering in the faith, sit with them around the banquet feast of heaven.

But whether we have one empty pew, or dozens, the same meals are served here even if only one seat is filled. It is the meal that Jesus has prepared for His sheep. He knows what His sheep need to eat, for He is the Good Shepherd. It is a meal both for our mouth and for our ears.

All of us have prepared meals for our dinner tables at home. Some of us have even spent hours slaving away in the kitchen to prepare such meals. When the meal is finally ready to be set on the table, the kitchen may be a mess, but the dinner table, now filled with food for the hungry family members, is beautiful in every detail.

This is true of the meal our Good Shepherd serves us. You and I had no part in preparing it. Sheep do not slave away making meals. They eat the food that is given them to eat. Jesus is the one who slaved away in the kitchen preparing the meal which so beautifully adorns our table here. *"I lay down My life for the sheep,"* He says. To prepare our meal, it cost Jesus much sweat, even with great drops of blood. The cost involved suffering, the suffering of punishment for the sins of us sheep. It cost our Good Shepherd His very life; a life laid down for us willingly because Jesus loves His sheep.

Was the cost worth it? Sometimes when we slave away in the kitchen, the meal we set on the table is a flop. Not so with our Good Shepherd. His meal for you is perfect in every detail. He fulfilled perfectly the entire Law of God for you. He perfectly completed your salvation on the cross, suffering everything that you and I deserve. With His words, "*It is finished!*" our Good Shepherd is calling to His sheep to tell us that all is done, the meal of our salvation is prepared. There is nothing--no work, no act of sacrifice--that we must add to the feast.

And the meal is beautiful. The kitchen is a mess. Jesus' death for us was a bloody death. His flesh was ripped open. His body was twisted in agony. That kitchen known as Golgotha not only was a painful sight to behold; the sounds and smells of death were overwhelming. But here, where the meal is served to us sheep, there is only beauty and adornment. The sacrifice was made in the kitchen; here on your table is the Sacrament. The punishment was delivered to your Lord on the cross; here at the table, God delivers to you forgiveness, life, salvation.

When you come here to your seat at the table, the dinner conversation is glorious. We, you and I, justly deserve to be condemned for our sinfulness, but your Good Shepherd gives you His body and blood and says, "I was condemned in your place...take eat, and drink...you are forgiven." God's conversation to you here at the table is the sweet dessert of joy, peace, and hope. You are His sheep whom He dearly loves. He will not abandon you in time of trouble. He will uphold you. He will carry you. No matter how dark your path may seem, your Good Shepherd is with you on your path. Do not fear the wolf, or the darkness of the unknown future. Do not fear the failures in your past and your weaknesses in the present. Jesus is the very meal that forgives you and sustains you. He is the conversation, the Word in your ears. He is the one who was dead, but now lives, and He lives to lead you to the banquet feast of heaven.

Today your seat at the table is filled, and your Good Shepherd here fills you with every grace and blessing. But what do we make of all the empty seats? Friends, let us not be discouraged. Listen to these words from our Good Shepherd in our text: "*I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one Shepherd.*"

Let us see these empty pews not as seats at the table which, sadly, are not being filled, but as seats that will be filled. Jesus has other sheep not yet in this fold. Some of these sheep are not baptized yet. Some of these sheep are not born yet. Some of these sheep are not now listening to the voice of their Good Shepherd, but they will. Some of these sheep are presently behind bars. Some of these sheep are struggling right now in their life and are staying away from the sheepfold, but they will listen to their Good Shepherd, and He will carry them to this very dinner table. "*I must bring them also,*" Jesus says. Why must He? Because He loves them as dearly as He loves you.

So even as you fill your seat at the table, you and I pray for Jesus' sheep who today are absent, but in time, will be seated here with us. Let us love them as their Good Shepherd loves them and us. Let us invite them. Let us encourage them. The food, the glorious meal our Good Shepherd here gives us is for all the flock. In heaven we will all be together, and so now we pray, and work, for such unity. Jesus' sheep are, after all, one flock with one Shepherd. Amen.