

Today, of course, is Good Shepherd Sunday, named that because of the emphasis of our readings today upon Christ as the Good Shepherd. Two aspects in particular are pointed out to us as to why He is our Good Shepherd. The first is the focus of the gospel reading from St. John chapter 10. Christ lays down His life for the sheep. The second is the focus of the epistle reading, namely that in love, Christ, who was without sin also suffered for us, shows us how to live righteously. He gives us an example so that we may follow in His steps. He gave Himself in love, and now He calls us to follow Him, to do the same.

These two themes are highlighted for us in the collect which reads:

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given thine only Son to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin, *(so He has laid down His life for the sheep)* and also an ensample of godly life; Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that his inestimable benefit, and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps of his most holy life; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *(so may we gratefully do as He did).*

The last half of that prayer is the petition part. We ask God to give us grace to thankfully receive his inestimable benefit and to endeavor to walk in Christ's example. Notice two things here. First, we don't ask that we would come up with the power on our own to do these two things. We ask that God would empower us to do these things. Our connection to God is critical to following the Good Shepherd. To have a strong connection to God means that we need to not only have a regular discipline of prayer and worship, but that we would also embrace that discipline with integrity. In other words, is our discipline sincere or is it merely going through the motions? Do we seek continual inner transformation or do we treat prayer and fellowship like a talisman that makes life good without a true pursuit of God?

There certainly are some times in life where we don't feel close to God, and so we rely upon our spiritual disciplines to keep us on track. The presumption here is that we want to be on

track. Unfortunately, we sometimes walk through the valley of the shadow of death. And sometimes we wander away from the path; we spy a berry bush just a little ways over there that looks really tasty. It isn't that far away, I can keep my eye on the path, I can come back when I've had my fill. However, we neglect to see the thorns on that bush that tangle us up and entrap us.

I wish this scenario always had a story book ending. Certainly our Good Shepherd will come when we call, but sometimes because of pride and pleasure, we do not call out to him. In the Epistle to the Hebrews and in the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians, we are seriously warned that turning away from the path will, not uncommonly, lead to death in the wilderness. It may be awful to enter into eternity, never having known God, but imagine what it will be like for those who knew the Good Shepherd and then turned their back upon Him. May God have mercy.

If we want the grace of God, then we must stay connected to God means a commitment to worship and an elimination of those things that distract us from God. Staying connected to God through His Church means that we are open to letting the Holy Spirit work in our lives and communicate the grace of God to us. Let us not go through the motions while really desiring other things. Let us not abuse the loving grace of God.

The second thing that we should notice in our petition is that we don't put following the Good Shepherd's example before receiving His salvation. We pray that we would *thankfully receive His inestimable benefit* before we pray to *follow the blessed steps of His most holy life*. If we forget about the love of Christ for us in that He suffered and died for us to make us able to live in God, then we will be frustrated as we strive to be holy. The Christ's love for us must be at the core of all of our endeavors. His love gives us the motivation to carry on. His love initiates salvation in our lives, and we merely respond to Him, we receive what He initiates.

If tomorrow, our lives began to crumble, if we lost everything, but we understood God's love for us, we held on with all that we had to Christ, we would be content. We might even be better for it because all of the pretense of contemporary comfort would be stripped away, and only the main thing would remain. I want the inestimable benefit of the love of God to be the focus of my life, the foundation of my life, the fixed point around which everything else revolves.

Of course, what I profess just now, is not generally how I live. The distractions of life, some merely selfish foolishness and some just the busy-ness of work and taxes and making a living, are always there. But the Easter season, and today, Good Shepherd Sunday, are gifts that help us to re-focus upon what is real, what is lasting, what will carry us through those dark valleys.

Yes, we want to follow the example of our Lord Jesus, but to do this, we must always nurture deep gratitude in our lives. We must nurture that deep spiritual affection for God at our core. And to do this, we must remove all of those things that block us from receiving the grace of God, and we must invest ourselves in worship and study of the Word of God. Easily said, challenging to implement.

Thanks be to God, though, that we are not alone in this journey. Our Good Shepherd is there for us when we stray. We simply need to call out to Him. His rod and His staff comfort us. They keep us on path.

This morning may we know deeply how greatly God loves us. May we forsake all the nonsense that averts our gaze from our Good Shepherd. May we simply follow Him in trust and confidence for He is everything that is holy, true, and good. Desire Christ brothers and

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2nd Sunday after Easter – Good Shepherd Sunday

K. Bartel, 4

sisters, and He will indeed lead you to the eternal fold.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. AMEN.