

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fourth Sunday of Easter - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

I John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

04/21/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said:] 11“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. 14I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Shepherd

Christ is risen! Good morning! I doubt this comes as a surprise, but I don't know anything about animal husbandry, let alone what it takes to be a full time shepherd now. I imagine it was even more challenging 2,000 years ago. But I did grow up working for a family business. So one particular part of this text makes a lot of sense. *"12The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep."* Now, plenty of employees at Crummitt and Son are and have been wonderful and hardworking people. But it was (understandably) always obvious that I cared a little bit more about the company than most of them did.

Which had me wondering. I'm sure that a lot of us care deeply and passionately about the ministry of St. Paul's, heck, Martha and Debbie were here when the church was founded, but if we're the hired hands, how much more does God care?

Grace has always been a challenge for me to understand. Grace is often defined as God's undeserved favor. Or, maybe you have heard the acronym "God's Riches At Christ's Expense." And while those are catchy, it's so much more! Grace is the word we use to describe the love that God has for us regardless of what we do. It's grace that saves us, it's the love of a God who wouldn't let sin win, who looked at a broken people and refused to let us die. Would you call your love for your children, or loved

ones “undeserved favor?” I hope not! You can’t help but love them! I love my nieces and nephews simply because of who they are!

But like I said. It’s always been a struggle for me to understand God’s love. This is some deep stuff about me, and I share it hoping that maybe it will connect with some of you too. Maybe it was part of the individualistic culture that we grew up with here in the west, or maybe it was because I came from a part of the country that prides itself on doing things alone. But for a great deal of my life I have always understood my self worth as being defined by what I could produce or contribute. The better a job I did, the harder I worked, the more valuable I was.

So in my teens and twenties, as my faith grew, my guilt over the constant reality of sin grew too. The Apostle Paul, St. Augustine, and Martin Luther struggled with this too. Generations of Christians have looked at the mess of their lives and said “no God could ever love me.” What’s even crazier is that these people have often had zero trouble articulating that grace for others, fully believing that God loves that other person. It’s just the self that can’t understand. And boy was that me. I’m just a little sheep, (I’m a much bigger sheep now!) There are literally 7 billion others like me, I can’t possibly be of any worth. And yet, there Jesus Christ was 2,000 years ago, dying on a cross for me anyway.

It’s an overwhelming amount of emotion for any sane person. And yet, here we are. So what I would like to do is assure you of that love. Sure, you’re not perfect, but none of us are. If you have lived your life struggling to understand how you could be seen as valuable, let me assure you that your life is more precious than all the riches

in the world. And that worth is communicated not because you did something to deserve it, but simply because you are God's beloved creation.

That's one of my favorite words in all of scripture. "Beloved." It conveys such a personal and intimate expression of care for another person. We rarely use the expression, and yet we see it frequently, especially in the Second Testament. Paul and other writers constantly refer to the community of believers as "beloved." The worth God sees in us is conveyed to one another too. That's the cool thing about the second half of our Gospel text: "*16I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*"

We are God's beloved, part of one flock. Just as you care deeply for the people closest to you, God calls on us to see that God has that same love for all those around us! Even the person we can't stand is a beloved child of God. Now, I thought about transitioning towards a call for all of us to go out in the world and make that love evident for others. I still think that's something we're called to do. But I don't think it's where we should go today. I don't want any of us to misconstrue God's grace as works righteousness. It will certainly help the world to do that. But God's love is not some conditional thing that requires us to earn it.

Instead spend this time dwelling deeply with the truth that God created you. As we read in Jeremiah, God assures us: "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...*"¹ God loves you so much that God laid down God's life to save you. Your worth was such that before you had even done a

¹ Jeremiah 1:5 NRSV

SINGLE THING God was already at work to save you. You don't need to be perfect, in fact, you never will. That's the whole point. Stop the guilt that makes it impossible for you to experience God's grace. The world may have told you that your worth is defined by what you can contribute, but beloved, this is a lie created by a sinful system that would stop you from seeing what God has always intended. You have been set free from this guilt. You have been set free to live. Never forget this, my beloved. "*May the God of all grace bless you now and forever. Amen.*"²

² Evangelical Book of Worship, p. 115.