

Misericordias Domini
26 April, Anno Domini 2020
St. John 10:11-16
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

The Second Adam, our Lord Jesus Christ, breathed His last and gave up His Spirit in His death. But this was no ordinary death. There was far more going on than meets the eye. This was the death of the Son of God, veiled in human flesh, in payment for the sins of the world. His innocence for our guilt. His life for our death. His death for our life. And when our salvation had been accomplished, this Adam's side was opened up and Blood and water came pouring out. From the dead Adam, came the new Eve, the Holy Christian Church, the mother of all the living in Christ, fashioned not out of a rib, but out of water and Blood. The true husband, gave Himself up for His beloved bride in order to cleanse her from every spot and stain of sin and present her to Himself pure and holy. It truly was finished. Salvation had been accomplished.

Then, last week, we heard again of our Lord's institution of the Office of the Keys - Jesus bestowing upon His Church His authority to forgive the sins of repentant sinners but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent. This is the fruit of Good Friday and Easter - sinners absolved of their sins, guilt removed, eternal death taken away forever. The Church exercises that authority by calling and ordaining men into the Office of the Holy Ministry. This office was also instituted and commanded by our Lord for the express purpose of speaking in His stead and by His command for the comforting of consciences and the teaching of God's Word.

Today, we see how all of this comes together and for what purpose. Today, we see that the whole purpose of our Lord's death and resurrection and His creation of the Church and the Holy Ministry is to gather His flock together to feed them and give them rest. So much Christian art reflects this. The mural in the narthex depicts Christ reaching out to rescue one of His lost lambs. There is a beautiful framed puzzle in the church office assembled by one of our members depicting our Lord surrounded by His precious flock. Everything in the Christian Church is ordered and oriented toward this purpose - gathering sinners around Jesus who alone protects them from sin and death.

Christianity isn't about getting things done. It isn't about retooling your life so that you are better, stronger, more disciplined, healthier, happier, and more independent. Christianity is about always being gathered around Jesus, hearing His voice, and following where He leads - drinking the water and eating the food which He provides. Members of the Body of Christ are not fat and sleek and strong and self-sufficient. They don't imagine themselves to be spiritually strong. Those sheep despise the Lord because they have no use for Him. Those sheep turn up their noses at the food and drink Christ gives. Instead, Christ's flock is filled with those who are weak and frail and afraid. They are broken and overwhelmed. Their life and their conscience is filled with turbulence. They are under attack from within and without. The true believer is the one who can say nothing of himself except that he is a sick, wandering, sinful sheep who needs a shepherd to save and lead him.

These are the sheep that Christ seeks out. He came to give life to those who confess that they have none. He came to seek the lost, bring back the straying, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. Thus the whole work of the Christian Church is this work of Christ. Indeed, the Church is the working of Christ to bring the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins to the whole world. It may not seem like much. It doesn't look like much is happening or that much of anything changes. But to the poor sinner that is living in terror of God's judgment because it is acutely aware of how deeply its sins offend God, nothing in the world matters more or could bring the peace of hearing God say, albeit through the lips of sinful men, "I have taken away your sins". No amount of self-improvement can do anything to bring us peace with God.

The flock of the Good Shepherd is a motley crew to be sure. In the eyes of the world we are a mess. We certainly aren't the sheep that win best in show at the 4H. We are ragged, covered in mud and fleas. Our wool is matted together with all kinds of lust and covetousness and vile pride. We stumble about. We are impatient. We very often foolishly fall into the very pitfalls of sin that our Shepherd points out as dangerous. There is bickering and jealousy. We do not always act in faith or love. You will still find greed and distrust and worry and sadness and depression and anxiety among us. We are still sinners, infected with the same poison of death as everyone else.

But that is exactly why Jesus has sought us out and why we will never stop needing Jesus. We will never outgrow our need for His mercy. That is really the true mark of spiritual maturity - an ever-deepening hunger for the mercy of the Good Shepherd and the gifts that He gives. We don't become less sinners. We are

certainly to fight against sin and resist the desires of the flesh. But only the death of the body will finally rid us of the Old Adam. It is false and foolish and eternally deadly to imagine that on this side of heaven you will become a super-Christian who doesn't struggle, who isn't seriously tempted, or who no longer needs Christ's constant outpouring of forgiveness. Truth be told, the one who takes the Word of God seriously actually becomes more and more aware of his need to pray daily, hourly for God's forgiveness and help against the wolves that surround him on every side. To believe the Word of God is to grow in your hunger for the preaching of God's Word, the rich comforts of your Baptism, the absolution, and the Supper of Christ's crucified and risen Body and Blood. If you feel that hunger diminishing or don't feel it at all, if this pandemic has provided you with sufficient excuse to despise preaching and the sacrament, if you don't pray or read the Scriptures in your home, repent. You have wandered away from the Good Shepherd right into the open jaws of the wolves and they will drag you into eternal death.

Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who has called YOU by name in the waters of Holy Baptism, rescuing you from death and hell, and brought you into His flock. He knows you as completely and personally as He and God the Father know one another. Stay near to Him by hearing His voice daily, reading and studying the Scriptures and listening to the voice of those He Himself has given you to speak in His Name. Take the life-giving food of His Body and Blood for the forgiveness of your sins and that you might learn to put to death the desires of your own flesh and instead live in fervent love toward one another. Cry out to Him as you feel the wolves hunting you and pressing in on you. Repent when you wander and seek His absolution. Your Shepherd has come to give you abundant life, something that you will never find in this world no matter how hard you look. You will not find it in your job, in your health, in your personal or professional accomplishments, or in leaders. Christ alone can give that life to you. And that is why He has drawn you into His Church. The Church is His precious flock for which He laid down His life. In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives your sins and the sins of all believers. In this Christian Church He binds up consciences and bestows forgiveness, life, and peace to all who seek it. In this Christian Church the Good Shepherd stands in the midst of His flock to protect you from the wolves which constantly seek your temporal and eternal destruction.

There more sheep yet to be gathered to the Good Shepherd. They need to hear His voice. They need His mercy and His peace just as you and I do. They may be your relatives, your friends, your neighbors, your coworkers, or complete strangers to you. But the Lord desires them as He desires you. What a privilege as Christ's

flock to seek out those sheep and bring them near to the Good Shepherd that together we may be one flock around one Shepherd now and for all eternity.

In the Name of +Jesus.