

John 10.11-16

Misericordias domini

1 May 2022

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!**

Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The text to which we turn our attention today is the Gospel, and especially these words of Jesus: "They shall listen to My voice."

Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.

It's probably the most unsettling question in all of Christendom: Why some and not others? That is, why are some saved, and others aren't? If God has chosen some, then why hasn't He chosen others?

And if He's chosen some and not others, how do I know that He's chosen me?

Really, at the end of the day, it's the question: What does God actually think of me? And how am I to know?

And that's a scary to place to be at.

Because you look at your life, and you can't find any proof there, really. Can you? Can God actually be pleased with you that you continue to struggle with old sins and develop new ones? That when it comes to the sin crouching at your door you haven't pummeled it and wrestled it to the ground, but just let come right into your house?

And can it be a sign of God's *pleasure* with you that your spouse has left you? That you've gotten cancer? That the kids at school make fun of you or bully you? That He's taken your loved ones away from you?

And the only conclusion I can draw is this: "I can't be sure. Maybe I have God's pleasure; maybe I don't. I want it, but I don't know. Maybe I have His favor; and maybe I don't. Can't tell. Worse yet, I certainly don't know if I'm among the 'some' who are saved, or among the 'others' who'll be condemned...."

"How *do* I figure this one out?"

According to Jesus, there are only two answers to that quandary. Answer number one: The voice of the hirelings. And answer number two: The voice of the Good Shepherd.

The hirelings' answer is this: "Do more, do better." It's the American creed. It's the pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps motto. Ranks right up there with *semper fi*. The reason your life isn't going well is because you're not trying hard enough. What sin are you harboring? There's obviously one lurking there. Overcome it. Don't do it anymore. And do more good.

That was exactly what the religious leaders of Jesus' day were telling their flock. They were oppressed by the Romans. Their freedom from Egypt had become vassalage to Rome. The land once flowing in milk and honey had become the ancient equivalent of one, big trailer park. And they had obviously fallen into the Lord's disfavor....

But if only the people could get their act together! If only they would strive for and achieve justice in the land! If only the few rich stopped oppressing the many poor! If they'd only start living like the people of God!—why, then, the Messiah would return. And He'd restore Israel. The trailer parks would give way to rich vineyards. Poverty and all that stems from it to wealth and all that stems from it. And they'd be blest by the Lord. That's how the hirelings took care of the flock. That's the food they fed them.

But Jesus says that this message is useless.

For all that that message neatly and logically ties doing good with getting good. For all that it neatly ties God's good pleasure in you with you doing something to *make* Him pleased with you. For all that, it leaves the flock vulnerable.

Vulnerable to the wolf. Vulnerable to Satan himself. Vulnerable to the accuser of mankind, who's constantly whispering in your ear: "Is it really enough? Why, then, leper, are you sick? Widow of Nain, why did your husband die early on you? And now your son's dead! Gerasene demoniac, if God's really on your side, then what's that strange voice coming out of your mouth saying, 'We are legion'? Bartimaeus, if God's pleased with you, then why are you reduced to blindness and begging, jobless, on the side of the road?" That's the Satanic sermon.

And to that pestering and devouring of the wolf, Satan, the hireling has no answer. There's nothing he can do. Because the only care for the flock he knows is what got the flock in the sights of the wolf in the first place. Do more. Do better. And the sheep are as good as dead.

As you can imagine, the good Doctor Luther had a great time with this text. For what was true of the teachers in Jesus' day and age was also true of the religious authorities in the year of our Lord 1520. Sin and death and eternal hell were to be overcome with vows and indulgences and private masses and becoming and being a monk and a nun.

But the story always had the same ending: the wolf always came. And the hirelings had no answer. They had no answer for the monk who whipped his back bloody, but couldn't put to death the sinful desires in his heart. They had no answer for the poor layman who only had a few pfennigs to spend on indulgences but a list of sins a mile long. They had no answer for the penitent who after 100 Hail Marys still had an evil conscience.

They had no answer. Except...do more, do better. Another coin in the indulgence box; 100 more Hail Marys; flog yourself a little harder.

You know the saying, *plus ça change*. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Well, things have changed. It's 2022, not A.D. 1520 or A.D. 31. It's North American, not Europe or Palestine. Being a monk and buying an indulgence is passé. Leprosy can be cured with antibiotics.

But for all that, they've stayed the same. And there's an entire brand of Christianity out there whose answer is still the same one the teachers of the Pharisees gave them. Whose answer is still the same as the pope and the bishops and the teachers of theology gave the people of Western Europe. And it's this: do more, do better.

Now, to be sure, for the person who's not worried about his sins, it sounds like exactly what it is: do-gooder pop psychology. The religion of Homer Simpson's neighbor Ned Flanders. The religion of Joel Osteen and the present generation that, just like their grandparents, have fallen yet again under the spell of a hireling whose only job is fleecing the flock. And it's risible.

But for the person who's burdened by his sins and who can't find and know a gracious God—for that person it has a great appeal. It makes sense. If I do good, God's certainly going to reward me. With His favor. With His grace. With blessings in this life. With everlasting life in the next.

Fellow-redeemed: walk into the churches where 98% of church-going Topeka can be found on a Sunday morning, and that's exactly the message you'll get. Do more, do better. That's what your neighbor's pastor preaches. And that's what your friends and neighbors believe: "Jesus has given me a chance. And now it's up to me to make good on it. Do more. Do better."

And they do. They do do more. And they do do better. And it looks great. It looks successful. It looks like the corner of 10th and Urish and the brand-spanking new church called Mission at Huntoon and Gage. It looks like all they've garnered from God is His utmost respect and favor.

But it's tragic. And I bring it up for two reasons. Number 1, so that you'll pity them and teach them the Gospel. Let them hear from your mouth the voice of the Good Shepherd. That the sum and total of the Gospel is this: that Christ has died for the sins of the world, and their sins, too. It's over and done. There's nothing more to be done to arrest God's favor, for Christ has won it *for them*.

And number 2, so that you'll steer a wide berth around that kind of teaching and preaching and recognize it for what it is. Hirelings look like shepherds. But they aren't. They're hirelings. There's only Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ Himself, who laid down His life for the flock. And the only faithful undershepherds of Christ are those who point to Him alone as the full and entire satisfaction for sin. He is the way, the truth, and life. There's no path of good works to be beaten alongside that Way. There's no life but the one He gives by His death.

But let's get back to the big question. Why some and not others? And how do I know if I'm "some" and not "others"? That is, how do I know that God has saved *me*? That God is favorable to *me*? That I have a gracious God in heaven who will see me through the sufferings of this life to the glory of the next?

Well, hear it straight from the mouth of Jesus: "They shall listen to My voice." What's the answer to that question? It's the voice of *Jesus* saying, "I lay down My life for the sheep."

And make no mistake, fellow-redeemed: It's here in His holy Church that that voice is loud and clear. Uniquely. You can't but it on amazon.com. It can't be found at the 18th hole, much less the 19th. And you're not going to hear it on the soccer field. You're going to hear it here.

Already at the beginning of the service—you know the words well—you hear the Good Shepherd's voice: "Almighty God in His mercy has given His Son to die for you and for His sake forgives you all your

sins.... I therefore forgive you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That’s *precisely* the voice of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the flock.

And this font up here. There you were “buried with Christ through Baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life.” You were made a partaker of the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the flock so that you’re also a partaker of His resurrection. That’s the voice of the Good Shepherd.

And in a few minutes you’ll come to this Table that the Lord has prepared for you in the face of your enemies—right in the face of sin and death and the devil. And there He’ll give you, not just bread and wine, a snack during the 7th-inning stretch, but something far more precious. The slain and risen Body, the Blood shed by the Good Shepherd who laid down His life. For no other reason than the one Jesus Himself gives: for the forgiveness of sins.

Fellow-redeemed, tell me. Is that not the voice of the Good Shepherd.

And if you hear that voice, make no mistake: the Good Shepherd has no other intention toward you than that you be in His flock. That’s what Jesus says: One flock. One Shepherd. You don’t get there by doing more. Christ has already done it all for you. You don’t get there by doing better. Christ has done far more excellently than 10,000 saints could do. You get there through the forgiveness of sins. You don’t get there by paying for your sins by suffering and dying. You get there through the voice of the Good Shepherd who has *already* laid down His life for the flock. Who has already suffered everything the wolf has to bring against the flock. And who has laid down His life that He might take it up. And ascend to the right hand of the Father. To send you preachers and the Holy Spirit so that you might hear His voice in Word and Sacrament. And confidently count yourself among the “some,” among the others belonging to the one flock of the One Good Shepherd.

God grant it to you for Christ’s sake. Amen.

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