

“Let Me Make This Perfectly Clear”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 15, 2011

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Holy Scriptures: Psalm 23; John 10: 1-10

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

John 10:1-10

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Christ came that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

A travelling evangelist was driving down a country road

when he saw a farmer out in a field.

The evangelist stopped and called out to the farmer, "*Are you lost?*"

"No," said the farmer. "*I've lived around here all my life.*"

"*But are you a member of the Christian family?*" asked the evangelist.

"No," said the farmer. "*They live over yonder.*"

Desperate, the evangelist asked, "*Are you ready for Judgment Day?*"

"*When is it?*" asked the farmer.

"*Judgment Day could be today or it could be tomorrow,*" said the evangelist.

"*Well,*" said the farmer, "*When you find out for sure when it is, let me know.*"

My wife will probably want to go both days!"

Judgment Day.

It could be here today or it could be tomorrow.

There are many among us in our culture and in the Body of Christ
who obsess over death and decay, over the finite, over the end of days.

I'm sorry – I can't get excited about any religion or religious practices
that speak only of the by-and-by,
that continually point upward to the pie in the sky
without dealing with the realities of life on earth.

Are you like me?

Does something deep down inside tell you
that if we spend all our days on earth looking toward heaven
we will miss out on the joy of life and love and one another,
and we'll sacrifice the abundance that Christ wills for us to have
and relish.

In John 10, Jesus reminds his followers that he is the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and they know his voice.

His message and his love for the sheep are clear and clearly communicated.

The will of the Shepherd is for the good of the flock.

Jesus Christ says, *"Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*

All who came before me are thieves and bandits;

but the sheep did not listen to them.

I am the gate.

Whoever enters by me will be saved,

and will come in and go out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Judgment Day could be here today or tomorrow.

What to do in the meantime?

Listen to your Good shepherd.

Be faithful.

“Rejoice always,

Pray constantly, and

In all circumstances give thanks.”

Christ came that you might have life, and have it abundantly.

Enjoy the abundance of life and have an abundant life.

Appreciate the beauty of God’s creation all around you, and within you as well.

Appreciate the beauty of God’s creations sitting beside you

and living with you and working alongside you.

When Betty and I were getting married,

I was so nervous that I flubbed the marriage vows we had written.

I was supposed to say, *“I love you as a creation of God.”*

What came out was, *“I love you as a creature of God.”*

She said *“I do”* anyway.

Appreciate those who love you even when you flub your words.

Appreciate those who love us when we fall short and fall apart and fall away,
as well as those whom you love
who fall shy of your expectations or let you down or put you
down.

Appreciate a Loving Creator who forgives us
when we, like sheep, nibble our way lost
only to look up and discover
that we are far from the path and fields God provides.

Appreciate that the Good Shepherd seeks us out, finds us wherever we are,
and then carries us home
– especially when we are not all cute and fluffy and cuddly,
but smelly and broken,
braying that we don't want to be found,
that we want to be left alone, thank
you very much.

Appreciate that the Good Shepherd seeks you out each and every day,
and that Christ has the will, the intent, the love to give you a clear
message.

The Good News is that we are not responsible for our own salvation.

The Good Shepherd whose revelation of his incarnation enables us to hear his
voice,

acts daily to seek us out.

He is the one who saves us, redeems us, and welcomes us home
to heaven

when our days on earth are done,

which could be today or it could be
tomorrow.

Christ came that we might have life...

There are some who desire to take away life and to disconnect folks with the holy.

In John 10, Jesus speaks of wolves and thieves and bandits,

of those whose will is to harm or steal or destroy.

We would not have to think for very long to consider the names and faces

of those who seek to do us harm,

whose will is for cheating or stealing or hurting

or even dissuading folks from following Christ.

The thief that Jesus refers to comes only to steal.

Unlike the thief,

the Word of God became flesh and lived among us.

The Logos, the Word of God, chose to be one with creation.

The thief hides and sneaks and slinks away.

The Word becomes real and visible and tangible -- God with skin on it,

and lives in our midst.

The Good Shepherd is visible, honest, accountable, nurturing.

The Good Shepherd is transparent.

The thief and the bandit hide out in their hideaway,

for they are afraid of being found out.

The Good Shepherd is perfectly clear, visible and available,

has nothing to hide or fear,

and wants to know you and be made known by you.

The Good Shepherd teaches us that

Jesus Christ is both the door to salvation and the way to the door.

As the Way, Jesus Christ is with you, walking alongside and within you,

shepherding the sheep he loves so much,

showing us the way to the door of life everlasting.

The Way is to practice charity; love your neighbor as you love yourself.

And when Judgment Day arrives, whether today or tomorrow,

then and there we will be delighted to discover

that the Shepherd is the Door, the Gate, the Entrance,

for the way to salvation is through Him.

Christ came so that we might have life, and have it abundantly.

He makes this message as clear as possible.

To communicate how and how much God loves us

the Good Shepherd uses stories, analogies, and sermons;

beatitudes, examples, and symbols;

systematic theology, homespun wisdom, and finally

his own body and last breath.

What more would you like to hear

or do you need to see

for the Good News to be made perfectly clear?
Transparent? Plain?

We have a friend from Chapel Hill who took a class in sign language.

She did so because she wanted to offer her voice to the voiceless,

and because she wanted to hear what those who are deaf need to communicate.

[Sounds like God with some skin on it.]

One day she was at an airport with a long delay between flights.

She decided to practice her basic sign language lessons.

She went into a restroom to practice in front of a mirror.

That way she could see how it would look to a deaf person.

Two high school-age girls walked into the restroom while she was practicing.

One girl said to the other, *“What is she doing?”*

“She is deaf. Leave her alone,” said her friend.

“Can’t you see that she is talking to herself?”

Let’s push the conversation to the next level.

What do you think happens when the Church of Jesus Christ is transparent?

What do you think happens when we dare to boldly strip away the layers

that cover and shade and hide,

and let ourselves be real, authentic, showing the world who we truly are,

revealing our true finances and participation figures
and gracious acts of hospitality and hope and
healing.

Nothing plastic here. As Popeye said, "I yam what I yam."

Nothing perfect here. As our own Minnie Haynes says, "Pobody's nerfect."

Only Christ. Christ only.

What do you think happens when a friendship
is based on authenticity, on transparency,
on being real and honest with each other?

Do we become frightened by the brightness of the lights,
or does our love deepen, growing stronger and more secure?

What do you think our social network and political scene
would look like, sound like, act like
if the Good Shepherd's example of divine transparency and
clarity
were applied in Decatur and Atlanta and Washington,
D.C.,
and in county seats across the nation?

What would happen if all those who advocate
for the 10 Commandments to be imprinted on statehouse walls
and Nativity Scenes erected on town squares
and Christian prayers to be lifted over interfaith
gatherings

were called upon to be fully transparent
in their words and deeds and
motivations?

What do you think: do our political deeds and social words

and economic motivations reveal a charitable
soul?

The 17th Century Saint Robert Bellarmine wrote:

“The School of Christ is the school of charity.

On the last day, when the general examination takes place,

there will be no questions at all on the text of Aristotle,

on the aphorisms of Hippocrates,

or on the paragraphs of Justinian.

Charity will be the whole syllabus.”

And what is another word of charity? Love.

Faith, hope, and charity. Faith, hope, and love.

Practice of charity in creation, for love is at the center of life and having it abundantly.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!