

Fourth Sunday after Easter – 2024

Acts 4:1-12

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18

Is it a sign of weakness to know that you need a Shepherd? We've heard quite a lot about "toxic masculinity" in the last few years. There are those who want to demean classic masculine traits. It is an attempt, on the part of some, to feminize our boys. Just so we get our terms correct, here's the definition for toxic masculinity: "a set of attitudes and ways of behaving, stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on society as a whole." We can all agree that men are capable of behaving like boors and worse. It is not an admirable trait to treat others poorly or to behave like one owns the world. But the term "toxic masculinity" is not intended to discourage bad behavior. The term is intended to degrade how we have understood masculinity itself. It is a lie to claim that there is something uniquely and intrinsically toxic within men and boys that needs to be exorcised. Christians know that we are to take our cues about critical aspects of life not from the culture but from God's Word.

Language is often the battleground. Abortion activists call ending a child's life in the womb "women's health care." Calling homosexual behavior contrary to God's will and a sin is "homophobic." Expressing opposition to transsexual ideology is "hate speech." We've come so far that saying that all men are created equal is "racist." Words are being redefined and our relationship with reality is being adversely affected. Jesus used words that tell you exactly who He is and exactly who we are. The eternal Son of God was made man. God Himself became a human being, a man, and He walked among us. The Lord Christ revealed Himself as true God and true Man. He used words, phrases of such import that they are to be seared into our mind, our heart. God describes Himself to you. God informs you as to who He is, what He is, and what your relationship to Him is – He does this tenderly, forcefully, graciously. I AM the bread of life (John 6:35). I AM the light of the world (John 8:12). I AM the door of the sheep (John 10:7). I AM the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). I AM the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). I AM the true vine (John 15:1).

That is the language of Christ. That is the language of revelation and glory and truth. That is language that you can trust, that you can rely on and take refuge in and celebrate and gain strength from. There's one more phrase to add to this exquisite list: I AM the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Jesus uses the name for God in the OT to describe Himself, I AM, and adds to it the pastoral image of a shepherd. You are His sheep. Is it a sign of weakness to know that you need a Shepherd? Big, brave you – independent and sophisticated you – you are the commander of your operation, aren't you? You are the master of your domain, aren't you? The king of your castle, the captain of your destiny, the architect of your days – that's you, right? Do you regularly contemplate the fact that you need a Shepherd? Sheep; they are vulnerable against an untamed enemy. If a sheep and a wolf get into a scrape I know how that is going to turn out. This world is broken. Sin is real. Evil is real. Death is real. Hell and Satan are real. There are those who want to divert your attention away from spiritual realities. Such people are not our allies. Christianity can never be merely a pleasant diversion. Christianity is an "all in" enterprise. There's too much at stake for it to be otherwise.

A sheep needs a shepherd; not just sometimes. The vulnerable can't overcome the forces of sin and death and Satan. It takes real strength to confess that you are weak (2 Corinthians 12:9). It takes real strength to let it be known that you need a Shepherd. Men who project genuine masculinity are men who point to Christ on the cross and proclaim that He is the One who shepherds me through the valley of the shadow of death; He laid down His life for me. A man who says that is masculine. We are all sheep. We are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand (Psalm 95:7). The church is the opposite of toxic as we celebrate Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd. This is what we celebrate: In love for His Creation, God the Father sent His Son into our broken domain to reclaim us by a holy sacrifice. The Son of God took upon Himself our flesh and lived a perfect life – loving God above all things and loving His neighbor as Himself. He is the law perfected (Romans 10:4). He is the Torah enacted. Jesus Christ is good and beautiful and true – and He was actively scorned by men. Though He was rejected, yet did He give and give and give. He healed the sick. He revealed the Father. He was obedient to the Father's will. He rendered up His life.

That is your Shepherd. He laid down His life for you. The wolf snatched at Him and He allowed it. He didn't have to allow it; He chose to allow it. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18). The Father glorified the Son as Jesus was lifted up, high and exalted, and crucified on a cross. Your Shepherd laid down His life. All power in heaven and earth are in His hands and He allows His hands to be pierced with nails, spikes, in order to gain for you the green pastures of heaven, the still waters of forgiveness and life. We are weak. He is strong. Crucified, He is strong. That is your Shepherd. The wolf is real. Adultery, in thought, word, and deed. The wolf is real. Theft, in thought, word, and deed. The wolf is real. None of us have kept a single commandment. Our own sin is a wolf with fang and claw and merciless appetite. The awful irony is that the sin that we engage in with the thought that we profit is the sin that would devour us. Sin promises what it cannot deliver and we buy it, fools that we are. Sin of every variety has this in common – it leaves us harassed and helpless. Sin leaves us empty and alone. We need a Shepherd. None of you can save yourselves. No government agency, no medical procedure, no diet and exercise regimen, no blue-chip investment can save you. Only the Good Shepherd, only the crucified Shepherd can save you.

How many of y'all regularly have deep conversations with others, loved ones, family members, neighbors? Personal and meaningful and deep conversations where nothing is hidden – is it common or is it rare? Would you say that those conversations are intimate? Do you suppose that each of us has a drive for intimacy, that is, a drive to know someone else, and be known, on a deep level? Who knows you? Who really, truly, deeply knows you? Jesus once looked out upon a crowd and saw them – completely and thoroughly saw them. The people Christ saw were helpless and harassed, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). God knows us (1 Corinthians 13:12). Jesus, the Great I AM, was made man. God clothed Himself in our poor flesh and bone and encountered human difficulty. He sees us. He knows us. He has experienced us. "I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14). When the Lord healed the sick, He knew their sickness. Jesus became intimate with sickness, with our sickness, our disease, our fear, our poverty, our failure, our selfishness. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us (2 Corinthians 5:21). Your Good Shepherd knows you. He knows your faith, because He put it there and He nurses it. He knows your love because He is love and His love is in you. He knows your humility and your generosity and your desire to fulfill your calling. The Lord

Christ Shepherds you in all these things. He Shepherds you with His life and you reflect Him, laying down your life for others.

What is magnificent for us is that we know Him. When you eat of His body and drink of His blood you know Him. When you forgive others as He first forgave you, you know Him, in your bones, in your soul. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me (Psalm 139:6). It's a resurrected Shepherd who tends this flock of sheep. What crisis is too big for Him? What earthly turmoil has He not addressed and conquered and quieted by His cross and tomb? The crucified King is my Shepherd. The risen Christ is my Shepherd. Isn't it glorious to be His sheep?