

The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 12, 2019

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

To a Precious Flock

[Acts 20:17–35](#)

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

In the first reading, from the Book of Acts, we heard St. Paul’s “farewell sermon.” To the pastors of the Church in Ephesus, ordained and installed as under-shepherds of Christ, he said, “THEREFORE I TESTIFY TO YOU THIS DAY THAT I AM INNOCENT OF THE BLOOD OF ALL OF YOU, FOR I DIDN’T SHRINK FROM DECLARING TO YOU THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD. PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO YOURSELVES AND TO ALL THE FLOCK, IN WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS MADE YOU OVERSEERS, TO CARE FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD, WHICH HE OBTAINED WITH HIS OWN BLOOD. I KNOW THAT AFTER MY DEPARTURE FIERCE WOLVES WILL COME IN AMONG YOU, NOT SPARING THE FLOCK; AND FROM AMONG YOUR OWN SELVES WILL ARISE MEN SPEAKING TWISTED THINGS, TO DRAW AWAY THE DISCIPLES AFTER THEM. THEREFORE BE ALERT. . . . AND NOW I COMMEND YOU TO GOD AND TO THE WORD OF HIS GRACE, WHICH IS ABLE TO BUILD YOU UP AND TO GIVE YOU THE INHERITANCE AMONG THOSE WHO ARE SANCTIFIED” (vv 26–32).

Introduction

Jesus is THE GOOD SHEPHERD (Jn 10:11). The Church is His FLOCK (v 28), the holy believers and sheep who hear His voice. And pastors are Christ’s under-shepherds. It’s their duty to care for Christ’s flock. It’s *my* duty and divine calling to care for all of you under Jesus, the Westminister flock. To serve on His behalf and speak for Him. To preach REPENTANCE TOWARD GOD and FAITH IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST (v 21). To boldly teach you the WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD (v 27). To do the work of the holy ministry by means of God’s word, baptism, absolution, and the Lord’s Supper.

The Church didn’t invent the holy ministry. The ministry started with Jesus. Crucified and risen from the dead, He showed Himself alive to the apostles, BREATHED ON THEM, and sent them to do His work, saying, “RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT. IF YOU FORGIVE THE SINS OF ANYONE, THEY ARE FORGIVEN; IF YOU WITHHOLD FORGIVENESS FROM ANYONE, IT IS WITHHELD” (Jn 20:22b–23). Showing Himself again beside the Sea of Galilee, He told St. Peter, “FEED MY LAMBS,” “TEND MY

SHEEP” (Jn 21:15, 16). Pastors are under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd. They follow in the steps of the apostles, of St. Paul, and of all the pastors who came before them.

In our first reading today, Acts chapter 20, we overheard one of St. Paul’s sermons. He may have preached this sermon for the ordination and installation of pastors for the churches in Ephesus. While traveling by ship from Greece on his way to Jerusalem, in the port of MILETUS, Paul SENT TO EPHESUS AND CALLED THE ELDERS OF THE CHURCH—a New Testament title for pastors, not lay leaders—TO COME TO HIM (v 17).

What we hear in this sermon is a fervent, moving, personal, and heartfelt message from St. Paul about his own past, present, and future. He proclaims that

YOU, DEAR FLOCK, ARE PRECIOUS TO THE LORD.

I.

Just how precious are you? So precious that the Lord called St. Paul to faith and gave him to the Church as a pastor and example of the Christian life. When he was dead in trespasses and sins, the risen Lord Jesus appeared to him and took him—then known as Saul—from his old life of persecuting Christians and baptized him into a new life of faith and love. Of Paul, Jesus said, “HE IS A CHOSEN INSTRUMENT OF MINE TO CARRY MY NAME BEFORE THE GENTILES AND KINGS AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL” and to “SUFFER FOR THE SAKE OF MY NAME” (Acts 9:15–16). He covered Paul with forgiveness, and He covers you with that same forgiveness. Then He gave Paul to be a pastor of the Church and an under-shepherd of the flock.

St. Paul reminds the pastors from Ephesus of how he lived among them in the past: “For your sake,” he says, “I was SERVING THE LORD WITH ALL HUMILITY AND WITH TEARS AND WITH TRIALS, . . . not shrinking FROM DECLARING TO YOU ANYTHING THAT WAS BENEFICIAL . . . , TESTIFYING BOTH TO JEWS AND GREEKS OF REPENTANCE TOWARD GOD AND OF FAITH IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST” (vv 19–21).

But what does this have to do with us? We haven’t personally known or heard St. Paul. We live in a different time and a different place. Yet his service was also for our sake. The Book of Acts describes part of his life. And the Holy Spirit inspired his letters—the thirteen New Testament books from Romans through Philemon—for our learning and spiritual benefit. It’s as if St. Paul were to say, “I was a shepherd on your behalf, offering my life, my time and energy, and even suffering for you sheep, that through me Jesus might make known His gospel to you, how He suffered, died, and rose for poor, pitiful sinners like us. And so I gave myself in sacrificial service not only to the Christians of

Asia Minor and Greece long ago, but for those, like you, who have come after.”
Through St. Paul, the gospel continues to come to us.

II.

Just how precious are you? So precious that the Lord’s plan for St. Paul would lead him to Jerusalem where he would be arrested for the sake of that gospel. “NOW, BEHOLD,” St. Paul says, “I’M GOING TO JERUSALEM. . . . THE HOLY SPIRIT TESTIFIES TO ME THAT IMPRISONMENT AND AFFLICTIONS AWAIT ME. BUT I DON’T ACCOUNT MY LIFE OF ANY VALUE NOR AS PRECIOUS TO MYSELF, IF ONLY I MAY FINISH MY COURSE AND THE MINISTRY THAT I RECEIVED FROM THE LORD JESUS, TO TESTIFY TO THE GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD (vv 22–24). Your salvation,” he says, “is of greater value than my own life, and I gladly offer myself to Jesus so that you may know Him and what He’s done for you. I testify to the gospel of the grace of God, to the undeserved forgiveness I myself received from Jesus on the road to Damascus and that He gives also to you.”

St. Paul shows how precious you are to Jesus, and how precious you are to me, your pastor and under-shepherd, and to one another. As I consider my own calling to Our Savior, and my vocations as husband to my wife and father to my family, I’m not to account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may give myself and finish my course and the ministry that I, like St. Paul, received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God to you. Where I fail in these callings, I ask your forgiveness in Jesus’ name, for I know how precious you are to Him.

III.

Just how precious are you? So precious that you were purchased by God’s OWN BLOOD (v 28) and are guarded by THE WORD OF HIS GRACE (v 32). “FOR I DIDN’T SHRINK FROM DECLARING TO YOU THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD,” St. Paul tells the pastors. “PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO YOURSELVES AND TO ALL THE FLOCK, IN WHICH THE HOLY SPIRIT HAS MADE YOU OVERSEERS, TO CARE FOR THE CHURCH OF GOD, WHICH HE OBTAINED WITH HIS OWN BLOOD. I KNOW THAT AFTER MY DEPARTURE FIERCE WOLVES WILL COME IN AMONG YOU, NOT SPARING THE FLOCK; AND FROM AMONG YOUR OWN SELVES WILL ARISE MEN SPEAKING TWISTED THINGS, TO DRAW AWAY THE DISCIPLES AFTER THEM. . . . NOW I COMMEND YOU TO GOD AND TO THE WORD OF HIS GRACE, WHICH IS ABLE TO BUILD YOU UP AND TO GIVE YOU THE INHERITANCE AMONG ALL THOSE WHO ARE SANCTIFIED” (vv 27–32).

You, dear flock, are THE CHURCH OF GOD and you were OBTAINED WITH God’s OWN BLOOD, for the blood of Jesus is the blood of God. He shed His blood to

purchase and win you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. An infinite price to show that you are infinitely precious to Him! Worth more to Him than His own life! And Jesus did this TO SAVE SINNERS (1 Tim 1:15). Do you want proof that He did it for you? “THIS CUP THAT IS POURED OUT FOR YOU,” Jesus says, “IS THE NEW COVENANT IN MY BLOOD” (Lk 22:20). May I, as pastor, and all of you, as brothers and sisters in Christ, see each other as sheep for whom God shed His blood.

And THE WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD has been given for your benefit, dear flock. Every word of Holy Scripture from Genesis to Revelation IS BREATHED OUT BY GOD for you (2 Tim 3:16). Yes, there are FIERCE WOLVES even within the Christian Church who by false teaching destroy the flock and draw away disciples from following Jesus. But in Holy Scripture and the gospel of our Lord we have GREEN PASTURES and STILL WATERS. They restore the SOUL and lead us on PATHS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (Ps 23:2, 3). The pure doctrine that flows from Scripture is vital to the life of the Church and the health of the flock. Learn it. Know it. Be fed by it. As St. Paul prepared to depart for Jerusalem, he commended the pastors and their flocks TO GOD AND TO THE WORD OF HIS GRACE, the word that IS ABLE TO BUILD YOU UP AND GIVE YOU THE INHERITANCE AMONG ALL THOSE WHO ARE SANCTIFIED (v 32).

Conclusion

You, dear flock, are so precious to Jesus, who shed His blood for you, and to St. Paul, and also to me, your pastor. And Jesus gives you this promise: “MY SHEEP HEAR MY VOICE, AND I KNOW THEM, AND THEY FOLLOW ME. I GIVE THEM ETERNAL LIFE, AND THEY WILL NEVER PERISH, AND NO ONE WILL SNATCH THEM OUT OF MY HAND” (Jn 10:27–28). You are secure in Him. You have nothing to fear.

Let us also imitate St. Paul in our life together, avoiding covetousness and treasuring each other as precious. “BY WORKING HARD, WE MUST HELP THE WEAK AND REMEMBER THE WORDS OF THE LORD JESUS, HOW HE HIMSELF SAID, ‘IT IS MORE BLESSED TO GIVE THAN TO RECEIVE’” (v 35). And we know Jesus meant what He said about it being more blessed to give than to receive, because He gave Himself, even His blood for us. And we know that St. Paul meant it, too, for He calls us the Church of God, the dear, precious flock of Jesus, and gave himself to serve us as well. May we ever be and remain the sheep of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

NOW I COMMEND YOU TO GOD AND TO THE WORD OF HIS GRACE, WHICH IS ABLE TO BUILD YOU UP AND TO GIVE YOU THE INHERITANCE AMONG ALL THOSE WHO ARE SANCTIFIED.

Acts 20:32