

## **The Mystery of the Gospel**

**Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**

Our text for Pentecost Tuesday, which has been translated to today, is from the Gospel according to John in the tenth chapter.

The difficult thing about our Lord's usage of figurative speech is that His words are often at the same time simple, and yet, so mysterious and profound. What I mean, is that even though the examples that Jesus uses to explain who He is and what He does are everyday things, when we really think about what He's saying, sometimes it doesn't really line up with what we might expect.

Take, for instance, some of the parables ... Farmers might resonate well with the idea that the Kingdom of God is like a sower who goes out to sow seeds, but what about a sower who recklessly chucks expensive seeds on even the bad soil? We'd probably all agree that that's not a very smart way to farm.

And businessmen might understand all the language about an owner of a vineyard and settling accounts, but how about an owner who pays a full day's wage to bums who only worked for an hour? Or what about an owner who rewards his manager even though he bamboozled him out of thousands of dollars? These are not worldly ways to conduct good business.

Even in terms of personal relationships, Jesus tends to push the envelope. Take, for example, the good Samaritan who not only helps out a complete stranger, if that wasn't hard enough to imagine, but then makes future plans to settle the bill when he comes by that way again. According to our cultural norms, this is just not how things usually work.

Likewise, the shepherd and sheep language from today's text might seem pretty straightforward, but we should note the fact that even the disciples – men who no doubt had a firm grasp on shepherding practices of the first century – even they did not understand what Jesus was saying.

One of the points to take away from this is that our Lord's figurative speech always has a specific function. He uses it, in one sense, to show us that the full truth about God and about His relationship to us, is really not like anything we experience in this life. In fact, it is beyond our ability to grasp. The more we try and rationalize it, the more it won't make any sense to us. Because the Lord's ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts. The Kingdom of Heaven is not like the kingdoms of men.

To be sure though, there are certain things about our text that do make sense to us on the surface. We've probably all heard how sheep can distinguish the particular voice of their shepherd and how they'll only follow after him. That, of course, matches up pretty well with what Jesus says about His sheep. And we've probably also heard how shepherds in first century had the practice of lying down in the gate of the sheep pen acting like a physical door. So, again, Jesus as the door lines up nicely. So far so good.

But the mystery deepens when we consider how our text today ends, and what immediately follows it in John's Gospel. Now it's not always appropriate to extend the pericope, but this is an instance where context is particularly important. Speaking about His sheep, Jesus says, "*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*"<sup>1</sup>

He continues, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*"<sup>2</sup> And here is where the comparison to worldly shepherding really seems to break down.

Yes, we can imagine how a shepherd might become very attached to his sheep. And if we consider what things would be like in a world without guns, and where there are plenty wolves and lions, I suppose that in Jesus' time there could be a serious threat to any shepherd's safety. So, it's probably also fair to say that at some point in time a shepherd went out of his way to provide for his sheep, even to the point of getting killed while defending them.

But all that aside, no shepherd, of any time period, would ever speak of his role as a shepherd in the way that Jesus does. He would never say that the sole purpose of his shepherding – the reason that he became a shepherd – was so that the sheep may, quote, "*have life and have it abundantly.*"<sup>3</sup>

When it comes down to it, earthly shepherds are not in it for the sake of the sheep. They are in it, like all farmers and businessmen, for the sake of the money – for the wool, the meat, and so forth. That is the purpose of their shepherding.

But this is not the case with our Lord. Something is backwards here, because Jesus is not like the shepherds of men. He comes to the wayward sheep of this world not that He might have abundant life through their giving, but that they might have abundant life through His giving. He

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<sup>1</sup> John 10:10b.

<sup>2</sup> John 10:11.

<sup>3</sup> John 10:10b.

does not live off us, but we live off Him. This is not the way of the world. But it is the way of the Savior.

All this is to say then that there may be hints of Divine realities in this world – especially considering that we were made in the image of God – but really, these are only hints at best. The comparisons always break down. The reason for this is twofold. First, because God is greater than anything that we can experience elsewhere in this world. And second, because His love for us in Christ is also greater than anything we can experience elsewhere in this world. Human analogies – and figures of speech – are always, in a way, too small to capture the fullness of this great mystery – the mystery of the Gospel.

I mean just think if we took this sheep and shepherd language a step further. Let's start with the sheep. Really, we sinners are a lot worse than your average sheep. Yes, we wander off and do our own thing, even at the expense of our safety and the well-being of those around us, but unlike sheep we have somewhat of a moral compass and rationale mind. Meaning, we can think for ourselves.

And yet, so often we don't use this gift for the benefit of others but for the sake of our own wants. Even though we know it's bad for us, still, we recklessly pursue our lusts, our spiteful anger, and our selfish greed. Sheep may be foolish, but we are deliberate sinners. So, it should go without saying that we really don't deserve any kind of shepherd, let alone a good one.

But in spite of all this – in spite of our deliberate and willful sins, and even our unknown sins, which there are plenty of those too – still Jesus comes for us. He knows everything about us and He still wants us. And notice too how He saves us. Our sins may be well beyond that of foolish sheep, but Jesus pushes the role of shepherd still farther than we can imagine. He becomes a sheep. He bears our sins in His own body and He takes our place. He dies our death. He trades His life for ours. And He makes us His flock – more than that – His Bride.

Jesus is the Door, the Good Shepherd, and the Lamb of God. He lays down His life for us and He takes it up again. He calls to His sheep through this Gospel and we hear His voice. The mystery is both simple and profound. We may not comprehend it, or be able to perfectly compare it to anything else, but nonetheless we reap its benefits. Even amidst our confusion and our sheep-like sins, still, Christ is our Shepherd. And the comfort He gives to us is this: every sheep that enters the pastures of heaven does so on His shoulders. It's not about us figuring

things out or making ourselves believe. Our Shepherd does it all. Jesus died. Jesus lives. Jesus forgives. And Jesus saves. Amen.

**And the peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

Pentecost Tuesday [Moved to midweek]

John 10:1-10; Isaiah 32:14-20; Acts 8:14-17

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