

4th Sunday of Easter April 25, 2010

John 10:22-30 Safe in Jesus' Flock

One of the fun things parents do as they wait for their children to be born or adopted is to think up names for them. When you are given a name, you belong to someone. You are part of a family. I've noticed this in the naming of my ancestors. My mother's Irish ancestors tended to repeat names in the family from one generation to the next. It was part of their identity. Even in the one branch of the family if you had the name Mary, you were automatically called "Mame." So my mother had a couple Aunt Mames. I see similar patterns of naming on my father's side where females in four generations were named "Margaret." However, the last Margaret refused to be called Margaret or "Little Margaret"; instead, she named herself "Margo." She is 82 years now and still goes by the name Margo. However, she did not name any of her children Margaret. While it is not unusual for families today not to follow traditional naming patterns of using old family names, it is true that names are very carefully chosen, and these names make the child part of the family. Do you know who you are named after?

However you are named, the Gospel reading today makes clear that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, knows your name and everything about you, and he will keep you safe in his Heavenly Father's flock, no matter how much the world and the devil attack the faith you have placed in your Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep will often be under attack. There has always been hostility by the world to Jesus and his disciples. In the Gospel reading today we hear the reluctance of the Jewish leaders to accept that Jesus was their Messiah:

The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep." (vv. 24-26)

It did not matter how many miracles Jesus did or what he taught, they continued to resist Jesus and were outright hostile to him. Even when Jesus told them plainly who he was, it was as if they had cotton in their ears. They would ask him again and again who he was. Even when they brought him for trial during holy week, they questioned who Jesus was. Jesus told them to ask the people who he was, but instead he was struck δ again and again. They put him on trial before Pilate. They called for his death by crucifixion. They refused to accept Jesus was their Messiah, and they were very hostile to him and his message δ even to seeking his death.

The world is similarly hostile to Jesus' disciples and message. Jesus forewarned his disciples that they would be treated as he was. After Jesus' resurrection from the dead, when the apostles began to proclaim that Jesus was the Messiah after Pentecost, the Jewish leaders arrested them on a couple occasions and demanded they no longer speak about Jesus. Throughout history there was opposition to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even today, we can encounter hostility to the message of Christ. In some instances, you are prohibited in the workplace to speak about the hope you have in Jesus Christ. In some families, religious topics are avoided because of the heated arguments people can get into. We can relate to the lack of faith in the world, the criticism of Christians and the faith, and the evidence of rejection. We don't understand why some people are so resistant to the faith. But Jesus explains it this way: "They do always resist the Holy Spirit."

Such hostility seeks to draw us away from Christ and the Word. And the negative response we receive does not have to be blatantly hostile or critical. It can be subtle. Sheep can easily be tempted by the world to follow other shepherds or Christs. When we or our witness is rejected, it becomes easier to listen to the voices of strangers that lead us away from Christ. These voices pervert what we believe is true so that we begin to trust the lie. For example, when Crystal Boyersox was ready to throw in the towel on American Idol this year to return to her family where she felt she must be, Ryan Seacrest put before her an alternative thought. He told her that "being on Idol is like starting a business. You can leave with a recording contract. You can become a millionaire. I made a lot of money and bought my mother a house. You can buy your mother a house." It shows that people can be tempted to accept an alternative truth, even when we know that ours is correct or better or the right thing to do. So likewise when it comes to defending our Christian faith, hostility to our witness from others δ subtle or direct δ can damage our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ above all things.

The fact is that the Word does always draw a response. When the message of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ is spoken, it will always draw a response δ for or against Christ.

The Holy Spirit created faith in our own hearts when we heard the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit is always working through the Christian witness to create faith in the hearts of others. But sometimes people resist the message of Jesus Christ. However, this does not change the fact that the Gospel is the only means by which people can be saved from sin and eternal death. We must continue to speak the message of Christ to others, even when we face hostility, in order to stand strong ourselves but also to hold out life even to our spiritual enemies.

How terrifying it is to live in the world without a Shepherd, because we can lose our focus on what is really important. Going back to the American Idol story once again, while it is not wrong to seek a career for ourselves and to improve our lives or to make a lot of money (if that should happen), what the story shows is how easily we can become convinced to trust money or the things of this world. Everyday people are tempted to follow roads that lead to riches, success, self-improvement, the passing pleasures of this life, and food and drugs that feed the stomach and confuse the mind. Without a shepherd, sheep are more easily led into danger and the way of death. Without a shepherd, it is easy to listen to the voice of strangers that lead them astray from Christ, the Good Shepherd.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, has planned for our safety. Through the Word, Jesus calls us by name and brings us into the church. We recognize his voice in the Word, and we follow him. Have you noticed that animals sometimes know the voice of their master? We have a rabbit, Hershey, who seems to know our voices. He looks up when he hears our voice. But it is more obvious with dogs and cats that seem to get used to our voices and our schedule. They will sit by the door and listen for the familiar sound of the car turning into the driveway. They hear the familiar key in the lock. They hear the voice of their master, and they respond with excited barking or jumping on the one they love. So we hear the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd, in God's Word. The Holy Spirit works through that Word to create saving faith in our hearts, and he thus brings us into the church with the gift of eternal life.

Jesus has made this eternal life possible for us because he lays down his life for the sheep. He protects us from the false shepherds who would like to lead us astray. He took the sins that separate us from God, and he carried them to the cross. He willingly gave his life into death so that we can have life from spiritual death. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He keeps us in the eternal life he won for us in his death and glorious resurrection.

Furthermore, Jesus prevents our being snatched out of his hand. He continues to feed us with his Word and Sacraments so that our faith grows strong and confident. When we come into eternal life, we will never perish. There is nothing that can take us from Jesus. But we have this eternal life already through Jesus's name, so Jesus protects us and keeps us in the Christian faith. He saves us and brings us to eternal life, and the Holy Spirit works to keep us safe in this Christian faith.

Being safe with Jesus means our Heavenly Father also keeps us safe. The Father and the Son are one together in essence and work. To know the Son is to know the Father. Jesus and the Father are one in essence so that we can confess that they are one God but three persons with the Holy Spirit. But it is not just with their divine essence that they are one. The work that Jesus did through the cross is the Father's work. God, who loved us and the entire world, sent Jesus to be our Savior through his death and resurrection. When Jesus died on the cross for us, he fulfilled the charge he received from his Father.

Now when Jesus speaks through the Word, it is God's very voice speaking to us. Jesus reminded his disciples before his death that after he left, the Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance everything he taught them. The apostles and evangelists, along with the writers of the Old Testament, wrote down the Bible by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But what the Holy Spirit led them to write was what Jesus gave them first to say. But even what Jesus gave them to write was not his own message. He taught them what the Father had given him to teach. So the result is that when our Good Shepherd speaks the Word of God to us, we hear how much our Heavenly Father loves us.

Finally, Jesus's protection of his followers shows that God cares for us. Jesus says:

"My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand." (v. 29)

So just as no one can snatch us from Jesus's hand, no one can snatch us out of our Heavenly Father's hand. He is working to keep us safe in the true Christian faith so that we can live eternally with him in heaven. It is just as St. Paul writes in Ephesians 1:

"He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves." (Ephesians 1:4-6)

Just as the Son works to protect and keep us in the Christian faith, so does our Heavenly Father.

Parents love to pick out names for their children. When you are given a name, you are identified as members of a family and are taken care of and protected. Each of us has that kind of name; it's special for us. When we were baptized into Christ, we were given another name: Christian. Christ Jesus, our Good Shepherd, knows both our names. He knows our given name, but he also knows our baptismal name, and that's even more personal because it means we are part of God's family. In Christ, we are chosen as members of the family of God. In Christ, we are protected and cared for by our heavenly Father. In Christ, we have eternal security. In Christ, we are safe. We are safe in Jesus's name and in his flock.