

The Shepherd's Living Love

“*Greater love hath no one than this: that someone lay down his life for his friends.*” Jesus spoke those words to His disciples on Maundy Thursday evening, mere minutes before He would leave for the Garden of Gethsemane and willingly endure all the wrath and terror that would soon follow...all the way to Golgotha. Makes sense, doesn't it? We know what Jesus is saying here when He speaks of laying down His life for His friends. ***What about the “greater love” part?*** So often we think of this only in terms of Jesus and His love; i.e., Jesus shows the greatest love by laying down His life for His friends. There is no greater love than this [*the crucifix*]. ***This is true, but might we be missing something?*** What about the Father's great love for Jesus?

Why does the Father love Jesus? Jesus Himself answers this in today's Gospel lesson: “*Because I lay down My life for the sheep.*” Okay...that makes perfect sense too. There is truly no greater love than the love that the Father has for His only-begotten Son. Why? Because the only-begotten Son lays down His life for the flock. Jesus dies for the sheep.

Well... you know as well as I do that ***there's more to the story.*** Like St. Paul says, if Jesus is ***still*** dead, we're to be pitied most of all. If Jesus is still dead, our faith and our hope are all in vain. If His rotted, dusty remains still reside here on earth in some tomb or ossuary or crypt, **we're dead.** We have no future, no hope, no salvation.

That's what is so often missed (overlooked) with these words from our Good Shepherd. God the Father doesn't love Jesus simply because Jesus dies fighting for the sheep. No! That would be no different than someone dying while fighting for his country, his family, or his friend. ***It's brave. It's noble. It's heroic.*** But...that's not why the Father loves Jesus. Think about it from a simple, worldly perspective. The Shepherd dies for the sheep...***so what good does that do the sheep?*** If the shepherd is dead, now the sheep are left unprotected, right? Without the shepherd around, now the wolves are left free to scatter and slaughter the sheep. There is more to it than simply laying down His life for the sheep/dying. There has to be. There **must** be.

God the Father doesn't love Jesus simply because Jesus dies in defense of the sheep. No! The Father loves Jesus because Jesus offers up Himself ***in place of the sheep.*** **There's a difference.** Remember, the wage of sin requires the payment of death. That's the price of being at enmity with God. That's the price of rejecting Him and His grace and His love. That's the price of self-serving, glory-hounding unbelief: death—temporal and eternal; physical and spiritual. If the debt of sin is going to be satisfied, death is required for payment. Blood must be shed. But here's the problem: All the blood of ***ALL*** of Adam's sinful offspring

could be shed, *and it still wouldn't be enough to pay for even one single sin.* No matter how good or noble or heroic you may be, you're still a sinner, conceived into sin. Sin isn't just what you do; it's who you are—by nature—sinful and unclean. Even if you laid down your very life in an attempt to make atonement for your sin, *you would come up utterly empty and bankrupt.* You simply don't have the right currency to pay for one single sin, let alone all of your sin. Only the blood of the sinless can cover over and make atonement for sin.

Well...there's only One sinless one—Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He willingly lays down His life **in place of the sheep.** His love for the sheep is so deep and so full and complete that He willingly gives His life so that the sheep will not have to die. And He does this with all *divine confidence and peace and assurance.* After all, the Father has given Him all authority over death. This is what's so often missed in these words of Jesus. *The Good News is not just that Jesus dies for the flock.* He also rises again from death in victory.

Even as He processes to Golgotha, Jesus already knows that He will vanquish death. **He has nothing to fear.** As He's laying down His life; as the blood is pouring forth from His wounds; as the life is ebbing away, and the weight of all the sin for all mankind is crushing down on Him—*He remains faithfully at peace.* He will die, and to heavenly paradise will His soul go...AND His soul will be reunited with His body three days later as He exercises His authority to take up His life again and rise from the dead—*body and soul complete.* He knows. He trusts. Yes, He will die...and He will rise again three days later. This is the *whole reason* that the Father sent His only-begotten Son: *to live, die, and rise again for us and our salvation.* *Jesus has to rise,* because without a resurrection from the dead, there is no victory over death and the grave.

This is precisely why we faithfully fill in that “resurrection blank” when we hear Jesus foretell how He will lay down His life for His sheep. You may not realize that you do this, *but you do...through faith.* When Jesus speaks of laying down His life for the sheep, we already know the rest of the story, don't we? The story doesn't end at Golgotha on Good Friday. Not only that, but we know, by faith and through faith, that Jesus' death isn't like any other death. Jesus' death is actually *offensive*, and I don't mean in the contemporary, snowflaky kind of way, as if the Word of Christ's crucifixion hurts your feelings and makes you uncomfortable. Although... the death of Christ for your sin *should* offend you. After all, your sin is so great that **God had to die for it.** That is offensive. That is deeply disturbing and troubling. But...that's not what I mean when I say that Jesus' death is offensive.

Look at this cross. Here is God—your Good Shepherd—*on the offensive for you!* His death is actively destroying death. This [*the crucifix*] is God doing something about your sin and your justly-deserved death sentence. This is where

the head of that wicked serpent was crushed. This is where all sin, death, and the devil was defeated. This is where Christ Himself declared, *“It is finished!”* **Only** Jesus has the authority to say this, because as sure as Christ dies, He **will** rise again. The crucifixion and resurrection necessarily go together like two sides of the same coin. ***It is finished. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

Even though I know that you already know all of this, I say it because it’s very easy to look around at the world we live in—this valley of shadowy death and darkness—and feel ***uneasy, unsure, perhaps even a bit dejected and hopeless... maybe even a bit afraid.*** It ain’t easy being faithful in this world, is it? It’s offensive, and with offense comes suffering, and nobody wants that, do they? It’s very easy to look around and wonder if God even knows or cares what’s going on here. It’s very easy to doubt Christ’s proclamation of victory. *“It’s finished? What’s finished? From my vantage point, evil still seems to have the upper hand.”*

My dear fellow lambs: ***Don’t trust your eyes! Trust your ears!*** Behold, your substitute! Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away all the sin of the world. Behold, your Good Shepherd, who has laid down His life and taken it up again ***for you.*** His all-atoning death and His victorious proclamation declare your victory and your peace. His resurrection ***proves*** His victory over sin, death, and the grave, and His victory is your victory, for you are baptized into Him; into His death and resurrection. He is the first-fruits of all who believe. His resurrection ***will*** be your resurrection. The empty tomb; the pierced hands and riven side that our Lord and Savior still bears in His resurrected body...***all proof, all receipts for that all-redeeming Good Friday transaction, which was made all for you.***

If you’ve heard nothing else up to this point, hear this: Jesus died for you. Jesus rose again from the dead...***for you.*** Jesus lives...***for you.*** And because Jesus lives, ***you too will live.*** *“He who believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die.”* For those who hold fast in faith to the victorious Good Shepherd, physical death is ***nothing*** to fear. In fact, Jesus Himself often refers to it as simply falling asleep. They’re asleep because they know in/through faith that they will rise again, ***never to die again... just like their Good Shepherd.*** As St. Paul tells us, He is the firstfruits of all who fall asleep in the faith. As Christ is, all those who fall asleep in the faith will be.

Such Good News, which is understood only in the certainty of faith, enables faithful little lambs of God to live “differently” from all the other lost sheep and goats of this world. Faithfully confident in their Good Shepherd, they live unshaken, unafraid, not running for the hills the moment fangs get bared or the howls of offense sound forth. Little lambs of God are just different—they live differently—because their confidence and assurance and peace is in their Good

Shepherd and His victory, which was made their victory in holy baptism. They know (and hold fast to) what that baptismal victory means. It means they will rise again and dwell eternally with their Good Shepherd—body and soul complete—in the paradise of heaven.

My little lambs: Yes, the devil still prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking to devour the little lambs of God. The wolves of this world—demons and people—still seek to scatter and destroy the flock, and it will be this way until our Lord mercifully returns in judgment. But... take heart and rejoice. Be at peace. Rest/sabbath in the peace that your Good Shepherd provides for you even now in the lush little pasture we call “worship,” for Christ, your Good Shepherd, lives. Jesus lives, the victory’s won... and His victory is your victory. May this Gospel peace, which is known and understood only in faith, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Him, now and into all eternity.

AMEN