Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter (C), May 12, 2019

John 10:19-31 (esp. v. 27-28)

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In the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Word of God which engages us this morning is based on John 10: “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.”

Jesus knows his sheep. He chose us from before the foundation of the world. He elected us to eternal life before we ever were alive. He decided ahead-of-time that many people should know the voice of their Shepherd, and so he reveals himself to us.

Jesus speaks. He does not remain hidden. He does not leave us to grasp around for him or search for him. No, he comes to us. He shows himself to us in every facet of this life that he has created. He calls to us through his Word of Holy Scripture. The Son of God took on our human flesh so that his people could see their God face to face. God speaks to us—most directly when Jesus opens his mouth.

His sheep hear him. They know the voice of their Good Shepherd. God sends his Holy Spirit to make us recognize Jesus as God and Lord. We hear in his voice the sharp command like the dog’s bite or the staff’s pointed nudge. But we also hear in the same voice the comfort and assurance we so desperately need. Jesus speaks, and we know where home is. He brings us to safety. He guards and defends us, and so we follow him closely. We keep listening to his voice so that we might not wander astray—so that the wolf might not snatch us away.

But even so, our Good Shepherd is more attentive and more powerful than any wolf. No one is able to snatch us out of his hand. No prowling lion. No crafty serpent. No power of hell nor scheme of man could ever pluck us from his hand. Not from our Shepherd. Not from the One who guards and defends us; who made us his own; who chose us from the beginning; indeed who created us from nothing, together with every wolf, demon, and devil. We belong to our Shepherd in every sense. He bought and paid for us by laying down his life for us his sheep. No one will snatch us out of his hand. No matter what. That is his promise.

What a comfort this Word and promise of God is! What a joy and a blessed assurance. It answers any question we might have of our own sufficiency.

“How can we baptize the newly born Eva Fink today? A baby doesn’t know what’s going on. How can this be real faith?” “I give her eternal life, and she will never perish, and no one will snatch her out of my hand.” Boom. Done. Promised, given, and applied to Eva, *because* she is insufficient and incapable. Eva is now his sheep, because Jesus says so. Eva now has eternal life, because Jesus says so. No one will snatch Eva from Jesus’ hand, just as he says. Promised, given, and applied. This is most certainly true.

“But how about the mentally handicapped—those who can’t comprehend much of anything?” Jesus’ promise applies to people who are assaulted by every kind of sin and brokenness. “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.” Promised, given, and applied through the water and the Word.

“But what about those with Alzheimer’s or dementia—those who can’t remember a thing? Their mind is gone, although their body might remain healthy for years and years. They don’t know their children. They certainly don’t know their pastor. Can they really know their Lord?” Jesus’ promise still holds true. Our insufficiency—our inability to remember or do anything—does not nullify the Word of God which was promised, given, and applied to us. When our body, mind, or spirit become unsteady, Jesus’ promise remains steadfast, and no one will snatch us out of his hand. Jesus is our sufficiency.

It’s amazing how we even get glimpses of this from time to time. In my pastoral care, I’ve been at people’s deathbed in their final hours. And often, even if a person has been unresponsive, when I say the Lord’s Prayer aloud their mouth moves as they try to say it with me.

Or people with Alzheimer’s or dementia: their mind is gone, even if their body remains healthy for years. I’ve visited the same person at least 30-40 times, and every time I have to introduce myself to her because she doesn’t know who I am. Her eyes often seem vacant, as if she’s trying to remember who I am or even what she had for breakfast, but she’s always coming up empty. But you better believe that as soon as I start saying the Creed or the Lord’s Prayer, her expression changes and she’s right there saying it with me. These words tap into something inside her that’s deeper than memory, deeper than anything she’s aware of. She hears her Lord’s voice, and he knows her, and she follows him. He gives her eternal life, and she will never perish, and no one—not even Alzheimer’s or dementia—will snatch her out of Jesus’ hand.

This all-sufficiency of Jesus’ promise becomes vital when we start talking about things like suicide. What about people who know, not only the voice of their Shepherd, but also the voice of self-loathing and despair? Can there be any hope for people whose last act on this earth is taking away the life that God has given them, in a moment of weakness? Can they, too, be saved? “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

Jesus’ promise remains valid, but suicide is never something we desire or aim for. With Alzheimer’s, there are medical things we can do to keep it at bay as long as possible. It’s never good for someone not to recognize their kids. Likewise, it’s never good to commit suicide, and there are things we can do pastorally, in addition to the medical and emotional, to help keep depression at bay. If this is something you struggle with, please come talk to me. I’m quite familiar with that voice, too, and I want to help you hear the voice of the Lord instead.

Nevertheless, Jesus’ promise remains true and valid. Saint Paul writes of the sufficiency of God’s promise in this way:

“What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:31-39)

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? Who will condemn a person whom Jesus has declared innocent? What kind of death will separate you from the love of God? A moment of weakness? A moment of doubt and uncertainty as your mind fades from you? An inability to remember your baptism? Who will condemn you, when Jesus has promised, “I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand”? No one. Nothing. Not when Jesus has promised, given, and applied eternal life to you through the water and the Word.

Dear friends in Christ, eternal life is yours. Jesus promises. Your Shepherd will guard and defend you in the best of times and in the worst of times. He is your Lord when you have these great moments of confessing him publicly like our confirmands. He remains your Lord when, in your weakness, you are no longer able to confess him. Jesus’ promise remains true and valid.

“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.” Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.