

April 25, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Easter

“Life In the Flock”

John 10:11-18, 1 John 3:16-24

“There will be one flock, one shepherd.”

I will tell you right off the top, this sermon is a rough one because I’m trying to deal with this ambiguous concept we have called “Christian Fellowship”. We toss term around a lot, but what does it really mean? The dictionary defines fellowship in many ways: “companionship”, “community of interest, activity, feeling or experience”, “a company of equals or friends” and more. At the synodical and denominational level fellowship is a very touchy and guarded issue and rightly so, as we do want to honor the apostolic warnings in Holy Scripture against allowing false doctrine to work its way into the Christian church. Yet at our district pastors conferences if the leader says that there will be a time of fellowship tonight it generally means free food and beer.

Today’s Gospel tells us a lot about Jesus and it is truly comforting. Jesus is confidently stating who He is, the Good Shepherd, and what He shall do. The end there is another one of those places I picture Jesus speaking in the determined and resolute voice of a hero on a mission for which there is no option of failure, *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”* He will die. He will rise. It’s just the way it will be. Jesus will be victorious.

But in the preceding Good Shepherd talk Jesus says of His flock *“I know my own and my own know me.”* He says He has other sheep not of this fold, but they will listen to His voice and He will bring them in and... *“there will be one flock, one shepherd.”* That’s Christian Fellowship. Because Jesus dies, rises and gathers His flock, the sheep stand in fellowship with their Shepherd and with one another.

Is this flock under the one shepherd all of mankind? No! Of course not. This is only those who know the shepherd, who listen to His voice. This is the faithful believers; the invisible church. The Gospel of Jesus, received and believed binds all Christians together in fellowship. We agree with this...at least here in church, mostly. There still some who, despite what Scripture teaches all over the place, still think life in Christ is all one-on-one with Jesus and fellowship really isn’t a thing. They’re wrong, but that’s another sermon entirely.

My point is that this fellowship and unity we have in Christ with all believers is special and should be a hallmark of every Christian life. But think about those big activities out in your life—your job, your school, your hobbies, your circle of friends, your neighbors, your teams, leagues, Mardi Gras krewes, volunteer organizations, maybe even your families themselves. Are you in fellowship with them? I think you’d have to say yes, correct? There is a fellowship there to one degree or another.

Now the troubling question. Does your sense of abiding fellowship with Christ reign supreme in those areas, or does that kind of drop off the radar and the other fellowships rise to prominence when you’re out in that context in the world? (pause) Do you see what I’m getting at? I know this is kind of murky. What I mean is, when we’re not in Christian fellowship in churchy activities and we’re out in the world, do we just drop it and forget all about the flock and the shepherd until we formally come together as His people again? We do.

I've been on a bowling league and I've got to say, typically not considering my place in Christ's flock in the midst of that competition. At work and school there's a job to do, tasks to accomplish, work to be done with your comrades—Jesus isn't on the priority list. In social arenas you're trying to unwind, relax, have fun together—every gathering isn't a prayer meeting. I think for most if not all of us, I think a change of context equates with a changing of the fellowship that takes priority. And I think we're good with that. And I think it's wrong.

Don't get me wrong here. I get it. We've got to operate in the world right in front of us. Nobody wants their heart surgeon distracted worrying about objective justification vs. the necessity of good works before the heavenly Father when he has got your chest cracked open in the OR. The lady at the DMV doesn't need to be praying my renewed vehicle registration.

But baptized into Christ Jesus we stand in union with Him and with all others who stand by faith in His death and resurrection. We have a special relationship with them in Christ, and thus also stand apart from those who are not in Christ. This is how we are in Christ. He has made us in the world but not of the world. But we tend not to think this way. We tend to think, "I'm me, and I believe. Everybody else is everybody else, no distinction.

Consider what St. John writes in the epistle: *"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."* I would bet that hearing this, most of you automatically defaulted to this being about anybody a Christian encounters who is in dire need of help. It's not. When he says "brother" in context it is clear that he is specifically talking about another Christian with whom we are in fellowship in Christ.

This distinction of Christian fellowship is all over the epistles. Jesus talks this way in the Gospels. And could the being a people set apart for God be any clearer than in Old Testament Israel? God's people in fellowship with Him have always lived a separation from the world. St. James pulls no punches in making this absolutely and terrifyingly clear: *"You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."*

And yes, I know this is kind of a murky sermon and you're probably wondering what is my point. I simply want to exhort you and myself to ponder the wonderful, eternal fellowship we have with Christ and all believers and then take that with us out into the world. Know that in all we do, Jesus Christ is good shepherding you and all those who are of His flock...and there are those around you who aren't of His one flock.

This can be challenging and even painful, especially in your families. But it's good practice on several levels.

For yourself it's a bulwark against sin. Recognizing the Shepherd to whom you belong in all contexts sets you apart from the world. Acknowledging this, you'll not only be able, but even eager to distance yourself not only from the actions, but from the thinking and attitudes of the world that push to make sin somehow acceptable. And let's face it, there may be evil and ungodly people with whom circumstances dictate you must deal. Recognizing your true fellowship with Christ will help you draw necessary lines. Moreover, living in the reality of your Shepherd's loving sacrifice to save you, you'll be willing and ready to love your neighbor, which in itself is fulfilling of God's holy will.

For other Christians, this makes you an aid in time of trouble. When faith is weak and temptation great, in true fellowship in Christ you can admonish and encourage them back to the path that follows in the Shepherd's steps. When they stumble you can lead them to repentance and then be privileged to speak the Gospel of forgiveness that your Shepherd laid down His life

to obtain. Simply acknowledging that you are a fellow believer in any context lets your brothers and sisters know they are not alone there.

And for those outside the flock who have no fellowship with Christ you can be the one who proclaims like Peter, "*And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" When we don't recognize this divine fellowship dynamic out in the world it's real easy for us not to ponder the saved and unsaved around us. We're all "live and let live" in our minds when the reality is that we're being "live and let die" to the lost around us. Recognizing your blessed reality in Christ's flock out in life makes sharing this reality with those outside more of a priority there.

This is not clear cut. We can't see into people's hearts like Christ can. You can't look at a coworker, classmate, friend or family and see the cross stamped on their forehead. But you've got a brain and you are in relationship and conversation with folks in a whole bunch of worldly fellowships in life. But always keeping in mind that everywhere you live and breathe you are blessed to be in fellowship with your Shepherd and His flock will strengthen you for His service. Being joined to the one who laid down His life to forgive your sins and make you His, He will enable you to live out the divine fellowship His cross has made to be your eternal reality.

Amen.