

Listening to the Voice of the Good Shepherd

Kenneth Korby

John 10:11–16

The Tender Mercy of God

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

My dear brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ, this is probably the most tender Sunday of the Church's year, and certainly the theme is among the most favorite of Christian believers. The theme of the 23rd Psalm, one of the few Psalms that almost all of the Christians know, is a theme that is very dear to us. It is a theme of the tender mercy of God.

This picture of God's tenderness is not to be confused with sentimental emotion. This picture of God's tenderness is a very tough, a very substantive love that takes us out of death to life. This mercy is about the hardness of living in the life that is good and righteous and true. It is not a sentimental picture, and often the pictures we have of Jesus, no hair messed up, no scars, no bruises, no wounds, no fierce look in his eye, is the picture that makes us think sentimentally.

Now you know me well enough to know that I'm not against sentiment, I'm a sentimental duck. Give me some little children and I'm on the floor with them talking to them. It's just part of me.

But sentiment is not the heart of mercy.

A Shepherd Full of Death and Full of Life

This shepherd is full of suffering, conflict, and full of death. Your death, my death, the world's death, is what he carries in his body. It's not just an idea. And he carries the death of God's fury against our sin.

So this shepherd is full of death. In fact, his death perfects all death. He died once and for all. It is the perfect killing of our sins. His death. And this shepherd is full of it.

He is full of life. He rose from the dead never to die again. He is not on the way to the grave. He's gone through it and is alive.

And that's where he says, follow me. You are my sheep. Follow me. It is a full life. It is not some squeaky little life.

Not a Squeaky Little Life

Well, do I have to listen to the Gospel? Do I have to study the Scriptures? Do I have to pray? Do I have to go to worship? I don't know. I think I can get lost.

It's not a squeaky, shriveled up life. It is full. The cup runs over. Goodness and mercy, like dogs, chase us all our life. It is a tough mercy.

There is not anything that can wear out God's mercy. Your sin, the mess you make of your life, the repetitiveness of sin. All of that, the perversity that wants to turn the other way. God says, yes, we say no. He says, no, we say yes. All of that cannot wear out the mercy of God. It is enduring. It will be forever.

And our Psalm 136 repeats that every sentence, the mercy of the Lord endures forever. And it is in that mercy that you are utterly safe because you are alive.

The Shepherd Bound to Our Humanity

The hands of Jesus are the hands of a shepherd that have been [unclear]. And they drove a spike, [unclear] the size of a rail spike through his wrists to nail him down. And he was no spook going somewhere. When God chose to keep his oath, I, I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep. I will gather them, feed them, heal them, and make them to lie down in plenty, and I will watch over them. When He chose to be man, He chose to bind Himself to our humanity. Jesus is not a spook, now you see Him, now you don't. And in that body they nailed Him down.

A Fierce and Unfair Conflict

So there is a fierce conflict for our Good Shepherd, and it's very unfair. He lived in a world where he did no sin, and we poured it on. Not merely our drunkenness and lying and cheating, but our despising his words, our turning our hearts to everything else, filling our bellies with the sawdust of our own opinions about God. We poured it on, but he did not say

to hell with you all, I don't care if that's the way he wants to be. He quietly, without arguing, without abusing back, he took it to himself. He suffered, and he was righteous. He was not unrighteous.

Listen to that truth—speaking thief. Do you not fear God? Seeing that we are getting the same condemnation that God gets, we have deserved it. This man has done nothing wrong.

Now, you know what it's like to be punished for something wrong, and many of you have learned how to endure that. You made a mistake at work, and you got chewed out for it. You learned to be patient about it. It was right. You deserved it.

But some of you, and especially when you were children, and you youngsters know what I'm talking about. Some of you say, we got treated unfairly. It wasn't right. It was she who hit me, and I got spanked for it. It was he who told the lie, and I got my mouth washed out with soap. To suffer as one who is innocent, suffering wrong. That is misery.

And there is where the tender mercy of God is so strong, tender, and tough. He knows exactly about your suffering. He did not retaliate and say, it's not my fault, it's theirs. Let them pay up.

Don't you believe in God's law? If you do wrong, you get punished. That's what God's law says. And that's what happened. He put himself as the sinner for you and me, and God's law unleashed itself. He was condemned and killed as the criminal, and that he suffered.

So this trial and conflict of Jesus, our shepherd, is very fierce, and it is not fair. What is this, that God should take an innocent man and pay for our crimes and iniquities, a pure man and pay for the corruption of our own souls, a just man and pay for the crookedness of our minds? What is this?

This is the tender mercy of God, that's what it is, God swearing an oath, I will, I myself keep promise. And so he comes, not in a carpet with a spook inside, but a man with a navel, a man who could bleed, and a man who did, the Son of God, our shepherd and our pastor, our bishop.

Seeking the Scattered

And what is he doing? He is seeking the scattered. You and I, the scattered. He's seeking us.

Scattered by what? We're scattered by our perverse people. What I said, God says yes, we say no. God says no, we say yes. That's what it is to be perverse, [unclear]. I'll show God. He

didn't help me when I asked. I would say it essentially is. That is our scatteredness.

So there's the [unclear] scattered, and it's a terror to a [unclear]. It's the scattering of a pastor who will not preach the truth to his people, [unclear], because he wants to feed himself, wants to get his own salary, wants to stay alive, wants to be happy, wants to be liked, wants to be sure he can be promoted, go up to higher challenges, that he can accept all the things he wants. You have not fed my people, God said to them, and I will take them out of your mouth. You will eat them as well. So we are scattered when the word of truth is not preached.

You're not literally sheep eating grass. You are people who live on the word. My sheep hear my voice, they listen to what I say. So you have to be attentive to what you hear. For you are nourished and protected by that word.

Now do not imagine it makes no difference to me. I am scared when there are people in the congregation who suddenly decide they're not going to be present anymore. What have I done? How have I acted? What have I paid for it? It is a terror. It ought to be a terror to any pastor. And yet it is a presumption.

But it is not the pastor who makes and gathers the flock. He is flawed. I, myself, will be the shepherd, and he does it by the [unclear] of that word. But my sheep hear my voice, and they follow me, and I give them life, and I give them to the Father, and no man will pluck them out of my hand.

The Voice That Wakes the Dead

So the voice of Jesus is the voice that gathers the Church. It is the voice of God. My Father and I are one.

Jesus is not on an adventurous religious lark, that there's a God there and Jesus happens to be one way to God and other people have other ways, Buddha or New Age or nothing or atheist, whatever. This is where God speaks. He is the flesh word of God.

This is the voice that wakes the dead so that He comes to our world, this shepherd, in our death. Death is the ultimate scatterer, death of the soul scatters us from God, death of the body scatters us from ourselves, we fall apart, bones can't even hang together anymore, and we can't be around the ones we love, and they can't be around us. So that he comes to the place of the death, not to say, oh isn't this bad, I don't want my people to suffer death, let's see if we can

figure out some trick to get them out. That is not how He comes. He's no trickster. He's a bishop. He's a pastor. He's our pastor.

And He comes to take the death, to do the Father's pleasure. What God likes about me, said Jesus, is that I give up my life for my people. That's what God likes about me, because that's what God is like. That is what His mercy is about, to come to us in our death. And He doesn't want us dead, even though He kills us. He wants us alive. That's why He kills His sons.

And so He gathers us. He gives us life. That is how we are gathered from scattering. Death is not our master.

I've told you, and I tell you again, you may not trust death more than you trust the word of the Lord. Because His word wakes the dead. In fact, He rose from the dead. That gives the authority He has to speak the word of life. And so He gathers us.

Do not be so smart and uppity that you don't need to hear that word or learn it. To be gathered here is what he is doing. This is holy church manifested. Holy church is not some idea, some institution. It is the people of God listening to the voice of the shepherd and listening to that, following him.

Following Him into Unjust Suffering

Following him where? Following him into the life where you are called to suffer as he did. That's where you follow him to the cross.

Now you don't go and have real spikes driven through your wrists or through your legs. And then the more you bleed and the more you bleed out of your head, or if you have some apparition of bleeding out of your head, then you are much more holy, baloney to that baloney.

The place where you follow him is the place where you entrust your life to him in the place where it's also going to be unfair. If you get punished for doing wrong and you bear it patiently, that's no credit, you just did what you had to do. But when you live in your home, in your work, in your school, with your parents and with your children and with the congregation. And what happens is that you suffer unjustly. Then you bear it patiently.

You've got a boss that is rough, or a worker that is lazy, or a congregation that won't get itself moving. What do you do? Well, you trust your life to Him as Jesus did. He gave you an example. [unclear] You trust your life to Him.

For He is the one that tells you, I am your purity, your innocence, your life. I am. I am the Good Shepherd. And this is how you know I'm good. I give my life for you. And I want you to have that life.

A Table in the Presence of Our Enemies

So in the midst of all the enemies, He prepares a table for —“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” What enemy? This perversity within. This willingness to mistrust him. This intention to be a false one. I've got to save my own life. Nobody else is going to take care of it. That is an enemy within.

But there are enemies outside, too. People who make life very miserable for us. Drive us bonkers. Sometimes you hurt us. Sometimes they'll give us what they are obligated to give us.

And we live in a world where there's work. You've got to work. You've got to receive as well as give. In that world you must remember there is no friendship or grace or faith. The world is not your friendship. The world wants you to stop believing them. The world doesn't care if you're not religious. The world is probably encouraging religion. We're getting more and more religions all the time. But it will hate him. And if it hates him, it will not be a friend to you.

In the midst of that world where you work, it's weak, it's suffering. Do wrong and suffer wrong. There he prepares the table.

And the devil, of course, loves to watch you. You should fear him not because he is so strong, but because he is so old. He's been watching you a long time. He knows which button to push. And so he wants you to be like the shepherd who feeds himself on the flock. He does not want you to be Christ's flock. In the midst of that enemy, and all of you, like I, are on the way to death, In the midst of all those enemies, he prepares a table.

What He Does at the Table

And what does he do at that table? He talks to me. He says, I have watched. And now I see him, just like I thought. He talks to me.

Well, at the table, you listen to the talk of the shepherd. You are just watching. You are eating. He gives you water. Living water. Still water. Quiet, because it makes for peace. The water that has washed you, quieted your anger, cleansed you from your sins.

It gives you bread. That's the stuff we work for, are anxious about, worried about, fight over. It gives you bread. Then he says, eat my body. It is for you.

And he gives you wine, the medicine of joy, the drink of gladness. [unclear] he makes one body, for you eat one bread. He makes one people, for you have one cup. He makes one flock, because he is one God.

And so he sets this table before you in the presence of your enemies. You are gathered then to gather. He says come to me.

The tender mercy of our God, what a [unclear]! Gentle, tender, tough, enduring, complete, and a quiet in which you can be faith. The tender mercy of our God is still the universe. Hallelujah.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus for life everlasting.

SOURCE

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Transcribed from an audio recording of a sermon by Kenneth F. Korby (CTSFW Media). [unclear] marks words that could not be made out, and a few short passages may be missing.