

## ***Easter II Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins***

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By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

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The Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.

People either love lamb or hate it. Some people love lamb with a little mint sauce on the side, while others cannot stand it.

Wool, on the other hand, is less controversial. Almost all of us welcome its cozy warmth and softness.

My mind goes to rack of lamb and woolen sweaters today, for obvious reasons, I hope. This is Sheep Sunday. And when we think of sheep, many of us think of good food and fine clothing. We need to remember that people did not keep sheep as family pets, and still generally do not. Shepherds were not running shelters for lost sheep, they were raising a flock for fleecing and slaughter.

The sheep give their lives for the Shepherd. This is how it works in the world.

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We have grown so accustomed to the image of the Good Shepherd, in all ages one of the most popular representations of Christ, that we miss the radical way in which Jesus redefines shepherding.

The Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. This is nothing short of a complete reversal. And we need to plumb the depths of this mystery, for it is the Gospel of how God saves us in Christ, and it is the example Jesus leaves us.

Most of us pick friends, and end up friends with people, because we enjoy their company, we share common interests, and they have been kind to us. That is, we get something out of the relationship. But Jesus likewise radically redefines friendship for us. It is not about mutual back-scratching. It is not about what we receive but what we give, not about what we can get but what we can offer. Jesus tells us, "There is no greater love than this, that someone lay down their life for their friends."

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So Jesus likewise radically redefines greatness and authority:

"Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister (meaning one who serves); and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

The Son of man gives his life a ransom for many. The Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. This is leadership, this is authority, this is the rule and kingdom of God.

Part of the wonder of this Good Shepherd image is the way in which it conveys the tender care of God in Christ, but also how that was expressed in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the verses which follow where today's reading ended, Jesus says, "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."

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The willing death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is our salvation. He walks through the valley of the shadow of death for us and with us, making a way for us into the eternal house of the Lord. And he anoints us with his Holy Spirit and prepares the table and cup for us, of which this is a sweet foretaste and blessed assurance.

But the other wonder of this image of the Good Shepherd is, how in it is contained and expressed, how Christ is both the sacrifice for sin and also the example of godly life. You might want to turn to today's Collect in your Book of Common Prayer, page 191. You see there how we are reminded, and we must insist on this point with the greatest possible emphasis, that Jesus is **both** a sacrifice for sin **and** an example of godly life, that we are therefore given in him **both** something to receive **and** something to follow. This is not an either-or, but BOTH-AND. It is fascinating, that in the ancient lectionary of the Church, this point is made both two weeks before and two weeks after Easter. Jesus came to serve and to give his life a

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ransom, we heard on Passion Sunday. And today our readings recall how Christ gave his life for the sheep and left us an example that we should follow.

Remember that it was on the night he was betrayed, when Jesus had washed his disciples' feet, that he said to them, no doubt thinking of that very act of washing their feet but also of his whole passion, death and resurrection, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you."

In service and sacrifice, in patience and humility, Jesus has left us an example, and we are his followers, his sheep for whom he has given his own life. The Christian life, then, is about receiving and following Jesus, trusting and obeying him - the Good Shepherd.

The Collect from the Book of Common Prayer:

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given thine only Son

to be unto us both a sacrifice for sin,

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and also an example of godly life:

Give us grace that we may always most thankfully receive that  
his inestimable benefit,

and also daily endeavour ourselves to follow the blessed steps  
of his most holy life;

through the same Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Amen*