

April 14, 2024
Text: John 10:11-16

Third Sunday of Easter

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Last week, I had an interesting question put to me by a family member. He said that he has a friend who is wrestling with the question of what makes us sure that Christianity is the true faith. Other religions have their gods, their traditions, their holy books. Why is the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the one true God? How can it be that the Christian faith is right and everyone else is wrong?

Thankfully, my family member let me sleep on it and get back to him the next day. By God's grace, I was able to come up with an answer, or rather God's Word gave an answer. And coincidentally enough – or as far as there are coincidences with God – the answer I gave is actually tied into our Gospel reading for this morning. One of the ways we can know that our God is the only true God is because our God is the Good Shepherd.

What do I mean by that, that being the Good Shepherd shows how our God is the true God? Well, Jesus gives two key points about what it means that He is the Good Shepherd, and these two points show Him to be the true God. First, Jesus says this: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

This is profound, because it goes against our human ideas of what a shepherd does. We'd agree that a shepherd should care for his sheep. He should see that they have food and water, and try to protect them from dangers like wolves.

But to lay down his life? That's past the point of reason or common sense. After all, you go into the sheep business to make a living, and living sheep are of no benefit to a dead shepherd. No, the sheep are ultimately there for the benefit of the shepherd. The shepherd cares for the sheep so that he can profit from them.

This idea that the sheep exist to serve the shepherd is carried over by people when they don't know the true God and make up their own religious systems. If you read ancient mythologies, like that of the Greeks, you see that they make their gods in their own image, giving their gods passions and faults, conflicts and flaws.

Humanity exists to serve and worship the gods, to try to earn their unpredictable favor through sacrifices or heroic deeds dedicated to the gods. And perhaps a god or goddess might show some favor, though if someone else offered more sacrifices, well, too bad for you.

The ancient Romans would do this, actually. Before fighting against a kingdom or people, they would offer worship to the gods of that people and promise to serve the gods more faithfully than their current worshipers.

This idea of sacrifice and trying to win favor wasn't just found in the Greeks and Romans, either. Many, many ancient religions featured these ideas, from Norse mythology to the ancient Maya and Aztecs to the Canaanites and others who lived in the Promised Land.

As sinful human nature hasn't changed over time, neither has the character of the religions which man has invented since then. Consider Islam, or its remarkable similar cousin, Mormonism.

In both cases, a person claiming to be a prophet says he received a private revelation from God, saying that the truth has been corrupted and needs to be restored. This restored truth centers around obedience, keeping the laws and commands of "god" in order to earn salvation.

This god is claimed to be loving in restoring this "truth," but there's no real cost on his part. He merely points the path to heaven by his prophet's words, and it's up to each and every person to earn that path through obedience and good works, sacrifices, if you will. These might be making the pilgrimage to Mecca and fasting during Ramadan, or it might be going on your mission and being sealed to your wife for time and eternity in a Mormon Temple.

Either way, though, the bar is set so, so high by this "god" that tragically, you're never really certain of your salvation. You do your best, hope Allah is feeling merciful on judgment day, or settle for a lesser kingdom in eternity.

In all of these, or even Eastern religions that don't have a personal god but rather an impersonal energy or oneness of the universe, you never have certainty, because the burden is on you. The gods might show you the way, but it's up to you to get there.

Against all that stands the beautiful truth that the true God is the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. Many people claim their gods to be loving; our God is the only God who is love itself. Many other religions point to a path that man must climb; our God is the God who came down from heaven to bring us to Himself.

The love of the Good Shepherd was shown when He did what seems illogical or backward to sinful human nature and laid down His life for us. He is not the God who demands sacrifice to earn His love; He is the God who loved us – even while we were still sinners – and sacrificed Himself for us. He is the Creator who dies so that His creation might live. He is the God who doesn't just ignore the debt we owe to Him, but who goes and pays it Himself – at great personal cost.

He created us in His own image, and even though that image was broken by the fall into sin, we still recognize the love seen when someone sacrifices himself for the sake of another. Our God is not a god who is a reflection of our sinful desires, passions, and selfishness, but the God who sends His Spirit into our hearts to bring forth the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Our God does give us His Law, His Commandments, but these are not rungs on a ladder to heaven, but rather are there to show us His holiness, to keep wickedness in check, and to show us how to shine forth His light and love into the world.

Christians do good works, not in uncertain hope of maybe getting to heaven if we do enough, but out of faith and thanksgiving that we have a certain hope, because our place in heaven has been won for us by the blood of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, the Good Shepherd.

This great, sacrificial love of our God is tied to the second thing He says about what it means for Him to be the Good Shepherd. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own

know me.” Our God is not aloof and uncaring in some distant heaven. He isn’t an absentee deity who just checks in periodically to see how his puny creations are getting along.

He doesn’t just know of us, that we exist; He knows us. In biblical use, for one person to know another is a very close, intimate, relational thing. Our Good Shepherd knows our inmost desires, our troubles, our favorite things. He knows what brings us joy, what brings us sadness. He knows us better than any other person on earth. He knows us better even than we know ourselves.

This can be an uncomfortable, even a frightening thing, if we’re honest with ourselves, because it means that He knows even the things we wish He didn’t know. He knows what we’ve said when no one was around. He knows those thoughts that we keep locked away in our hearts. He knows our lies, our hypocrisy, our greed, our doubt, our pride. He knows our sins, each and every one of them.

Scripture tells us, “And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” This can be uncomfortable, because we know that those sins deserve punishment, a punishment we cannot bear.

But again, He has come to lay down His life precisely to take away that punishment. Jesus, the eternal Son of God, knew from the very beginning the innumerable sins of humanity, and He knew what would have to be done to take them away.

And because He is the God who is love, He willingly, gladly, agreed to pay the price, to bear the burden. The Bible spells out this wonderful truth when it says in Second Corinthians, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Immediately before that verse, the Scripture tells us why Jesus did this: so that we might be reconciled to God. The Good Shepherd laid down His life so that His sheep might know Him. Sin separated us from God; that’s its main effect.

And this separation from God is seen in the various false religions of the world. Not only do they show it by the simple fact that they don’t know who God truly is – hence the other gods and teachings – but also in the idea of the god or gods being distant, far off. The Greek gods lived on Mount Olympus, high above mere mortals.

Animism, such as seen in much of Native American religion, believes in spirits all throughout nature, and yet though you might hold them in your hand, you’ve no way of knowing for certain that this particular tree or river or animal holds you in its favor.

Allah of Islam is so far above humanity, so other, that he cannot be known directly, but only through the teachings of his prophet Muhammad. In Buddhism, there is no god to know at all, but rather a reaching of nirvana, where the individual self ceases to exist.

But again, the Good Shepherd came and laid down His life so that we might know Him just as He knows the Father. The Father and the Son are not separate deities that interact with one another only occasionally. They are bound together so closely that they, together with the Holy Spirit, are the One God. And they are bound together in love, the love of Father and Son.

That is the closeness and love that God desires to bring us into. The Good Shepherd laid down His life so that we might go from being enemies of God to being His adopted sons. In Holy Baptism, the Triune God puts His name on us, joining us to His everlasting family.

Our God delights to have us call Him 'Father' and to come to Him with all our needs and wants, joys and sorrows, worries and praises, and He, the Lord of the Universe, focuses His full and perfect attention on each one of them, however many there are. Every one of His children's prayers, praises, and thanksgivings comes before His throne, heard and understood by Him.

And as the perfectly loving Father, He gives us exactly what He knows is best for us, be that discipline or blessing, days of need or days of plenty, times of trial or times of joy. He gives us everything with the purpose of drawing us to Himself through His Son.

The Son, the Good Shepherd, speaks His word to His sheep, that they hear and know His voice, and follow Him. His sheep, His Christians, don't just know of Him or about Him, as we know someone who we met once and remember their name and could maybe pick them out at the grocery store.

No, we know Him because He has gathered us into His one flock, that we might be with Him constantly. And the more we're with Him and hearing His voice in the read and preached word, the better we know him. It's a spiral, a process that builds on itself. As He tells us in His word, "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you."

He delights for His people to dwell with Him; that's why He created mankind in the first place! That's the great hope Scripture gives us in Revelation, at the revealing of the New Jerusalem. A loud voice from heaven proclaims, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God." All things, our creation by the Father, our justification by the Son, our sanctification by the Holy Spirit, it all takes place because God knows us and wants us to know Him and be with Him forever.

The Good Shepherd has come so that people of all tribes, tongues, and nations might be gathered into His one flock, so that He will be their shepherd and carry them forever.

In the midst of the various calls of the hired hands and false teachers, the howling of the wolves, the confusion caused by our fallen nature, we hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. He is the God who has laid down His life for His sheep. He is the God who desires to know His people with a closeness we grasp only by faith. He, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the one, true, and only God, in whose house we shall dwell forever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!