

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

“It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple” (John 10:22b-23a). Our Gospel text says it was a special occasion – the festival of the Dedication, which, by the way, is another name for the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, also known as the festival of light.

This eight-day festival is in remembrance of the victories of Judas Maccabeus, and his purification and rededication of the temple —after it was cleansed by him from the pollution of pagan worship in 165 B.C.

The festival or feast is sometimes just called “Lights,” which is interesting in that the “light of the world” was present – and being challenged one more time. “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24b).

It’s as though they might have asked, “How long will you bother us? How long will you irritate us? Are you the Messiah? Tell us plainly, in words we can understand.”

But that was precisely the problem: they couldn’t understand, and Jesus knew it. He had already told them, and told them, and told them again, time and time and time again. They just didn’t get it – or didn’t want to get it.

He had told them when he healed the blind man. They didn’t listen. He told them when he fed the five thousand. Were their ears stopped up? He offered them the very bread of heaven, and himself as the bread of life.

He offered them living water. They appeared to be only puzzled and uncertain. He even told them he was the light of the world – and yet they choose to remain in their darkness. They refused to see, to *really* see whom it was that stood before them.

And each time he told them, they plotted and committed even more to destroy him. They had filled the temple with religious traditions and rules – and they held the power of interpretation over both. They had substituted blind obedience for genuine faith; they had replaced love as the center of faith with legalism instead.

Laws and laws, and rules and regulations; oh, so many laws and rules! You cannot heal on the Sabbath. Even a man’s sight is not as valued as the law. You must absolutely condemn the woman caught in adultery.

Mercy should not win out over righteousness, ever! You cannot seek for truth in a world of black and white. Someone must have sinned! Someone must be condemned!

The priests and the scribes and the Pharisees, in their blindness, could not even see the one standing right before them for whom he truly was.

They had their own visions of the Messiah. “Our Savior will be a conquering king,” they decided. “Our Savior will establish us in great power and glory.

Our Savior will be one of supreme authority, and will achieve for us what we cannot accomplish on our own. Our Savior will rule the world, and by the force and energy of his great dominion, he will take us to the top with him.”

Who was this poor peasant, preacher and prophet that he was, to tear down our dreams? Who was this humble carpenter turned healer to remind us that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of justice and mercy – a kingdom of love – a kingdom where all have enough, and all share and help each other?

Indeed, who was this Jesus? Who was this lamb that they led to the slaughter? Surprisingly, perhaps, these same questions still apply today by those who value “church” more than faith, which is not to set the two in opposition, or even suggest that they are at odds with each other.

The church, at its best, is the very body of Christ in the world today. It is the vehicle and proponent of faith; it is the spreader of the seeds of faith, and the catalyst for growth in faith.

But the church is also a human institution – and human beings are sinful. We can err on the side of caution as easily as we can err on the side of risk.

We can fail to protect the Gospel in its purity, and we can fail by being so protective of the Good News that we share it with no one.

We can be so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good; and we can be so earthly-minded that we are no heavenly good. Our traditions can enliven us, but they also can entrap us. How easily our focus can shift from having Christ as our center to having ourselves at the center!

And then there are those who are blinded by their own versions of the Savior, just like those in Jesus’ day. Like those who today say, “If you just have faith enough, God will protect you from all harm. The devil strikes those who don’t believe enough. Just have faith!”

But the truth is that evil is pervasive and powerful enough to afflict doubter and believer both. If you don’t believe it, go home today and read the Book of Job in the Old Testament!

And then there are those who say, “No need for God to wipe a tear from my eye. The Lord will see me have a good life. It’s prosperity believing! Possibility thinking! “The poor – they deserve what they’ve got.” Talk about a different Savior, and a different Gospel – but there are those who hold such views, sadly enough.

Perhaps we need to look again at the Christ who is standing before us.

Perhaps we need to listen one more time. “The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me,” says Jesus (John 10:25b). What are those works? Feed the hungry. Heal the sick. Forgive the sinner.

In following Jesus, we do these things – but not to earn forgiveness, or new life, or salvation. Those are gifts for us, through faith, by the grace and mercy of God, through Christ. We feed and heal and forgive in joyous response to what God has done for us in Christ!

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me,” says Jesus (John 10:27). As Jesus said earlier in this chapter ten of the Gospel of John, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

That’s exactly what Jesus did for us, on the cross, and that is the very heart and center of the Gospel, and the heart and center of our faith. And, for this reason, this Sunday is often called “Good Shepherd Sunday.”

And perhaps you are wondering if that’s why I chose this Sunday to retire. The answer is “yes” and “no.” I actually chose the date because my birthday was April 5<sup>th</sup>, but I thought if April 10<sup>th</sup> were my last Sunday, I might miss seeing some spring break travelers who had not yet returned – so I chose this Sunday.

And, yes, I quickly realized it was “Good Shepherd Sunday,” and I thought it an appropriate choice.

However, even though I have two clergy shirts which have embroidered on the breast pocket a sheep and a shepherd’s staff, I’ve most often thought of myself more as an under-shepherd, or even a sheep dog.

To me, there is really only one Good Shepherd, and he is Jesus Christ, and he is the most capable guardian and protector of our souls. To the degree that I have been able, as a pastor, to assist in that effort, I am grateful, and I am humble to have been employed in that most worthy cause.

“My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me,” says Jesus (John 10:27). And what then is their reward for following? We heard it in today’s second Reading, in the Revelation to John:

*Then one of the elders addressed me, saying “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.”*

*Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

*For this reason they are before the throne of God ... and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them ... and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:13-15, 17b). Amen.*

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding,  
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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