

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Deuteronomy 32:3-12; 1 Peter 5:6-11; Luke 15:1-10
You are the lost sheep. He is the Good Shepherd.

The Hammer of God, a novel by a now sainted Lutheran pastor from Sweden, contains a lovely and instructive scene where a young pastor, enthusiastic yet untrained in the school of the Savior, receives wise counsel from a more seasoned under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd. Here it is:

“I just want you to know from the beginning, sir, that I am a believer,” [the young Pastor Fridfeldt] said [to the older pastor.]...

“So you are a believer, I’m glad to hear that. What do you believe in?”

Fridfeldt stared dumbfounded at his superior....

“But, sir, I am simply saying that I am a believer.”

“Yes, I hear that, my boy. But what is it that you believe in?”

Fridfeldt was almost speechless.

“But don’t you know, sir, what it means to be a believer?”

“That is a word which can stand for things that differ greatly, my boy. I ask only what it is that *you* believe in.”

“In Jesus, of course,” answered Fridfeldt, raising his voice. “I mean—I meant that I have given him my heart.”...

“Do you consider *that* something to give him?”

By this time, Fridfeldt was almost in tears.

“But sir, if you do not give your heart to Jesus, you cannot be saved.”

“You are right, my boy. And it is just as true that, if you think you are saved because you give Jesus your heart, you will not be saved. You see, my boy,” he continued reassuringly, as he continued to look at the young pastor’s face, in which uncertainty and resentment were shown in a struggle for the upper hand, “it is *one thing* to choose Jesus as one’s Lord and Savior, to give him one’s heart and commit oneself to him, and that he now accepts one into his little flock; it is a very different thing to believe on him as a Redeemer of sinners, of whom one is chief. One does not choose a Redeemer for oneself, you understand, nor give one’s heart to him. The heart is a rusty old can on a junk heap. A fine birthday gift, indeed! But a wonderful Lord passes by, and has mercy on the wretched tin can, sticks his walking cane through it, and rescues it from the junk pile and takes it home with him. That is how it is.”

This last Thursday was the Commemoration of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession, that day when, called before all the powers of the Holy Roman Empire to renounce their faith, a handful of Lutheran leaders steadfastly confessed their faith in no uncertain terms, and then humbly bowed their heads, that the Emperor might strike them off if he so desired. They were ready to lose their heads to gain their crown, to give this life confessing their faith in Him who died to give them life eternal.

Why? The Lutheran Reformers knew they too were that rusty old can on a junk heap, the lost sheep and coin. They knew that they had not and could not have chosen God, nor have given Him a heart worth having, but that Christ had chosen them, had come into their hearts to renovate and renew them, to warm them with His undeserved love. This truth quieted their troubled consciences, gave peace to their hearts, and provided calm for their minds. The Reformers knew they were the sheep of the Good Shepherd, and they knew that His sheep heed His voice, and so that they heeded His voice by holding to His Word, even when threatened for doing so, because that Shepherd could lead them even through the valley of the shadow of death to the green pastures of the Promised Land, to the wedding feast of the Lamb of God who was slain for sinners, to the very table of God, of which we get a foretaste in the Lord’s Supper.

The Gospel appointed for the Commemoration of the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession is from John 21. In that Gospel, our risen Jesus appears to His apostles as they are fishing with little success, and He tells them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. When they do so, they can hardly haul in the catch. St. Peter was the first to recognize the Lord in this miracle, St. Peter who had denied Him during His passion not long earlier, and what does St. Peter do? He doesn't despair like Judas, or run away like Jonah, but he leaps into the water and swims as quickly as He can to the Good Shepherd. And Jesus welcomes Him, and three times He asks the repentant apostle if he loves Him, and three times St. Peter says he does, and each time Jesus urges the apostle to feed His sheep with the very same forgiveness and new life he himself has received.

That forgiveness is why the Church exists still today. All of us have wandered. All of us have denied our Lord, whether intentionally or not, through careless words and hurtful deeds, through impious thoughts and indifference toward His Word. We all like St. Peter have grounds to despair or run away from Jesus. Yet this Sunday reminds us that the best thing to do, what the Reformers did as well, is to jump back into the water, to swim in and through our Baptism back to our Jesus, to hear His forgiveness and go forth in His new life. He is the Good Shepherd. He gave His life for us and His voice always calls us back into His outstretched arms, bids us forward in His grace unto life everlasting.

This truth of the Christian Faith, of God's Holy Word, and this truth, realized by St. Peter and put into parables by our Lord, is too comforting and precious to trade for anything in this world, even our own lives. St. Peter learned that. As Jesus predicted right after St. Peter swam to Him, received Christ's forgiveness, and pledged his love for the Savior, the apostle was martyred for the Faith. Jesus told him, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go."* **St. John explains in the next verse,** *"(This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God.)"* Yet Jesus did not want the prospect of trial and suffering and persecution to deter St. Peter on that narrow path to heaven, and so we read, *"And after saying this he said to him, 'Follow me.'"*

Have you ever lost something important? I don't know about you, but I have a knack for it. Parents, maybe you've even managed for a moment to lose your child in a store or somewhere else. Do you know that panic you feel when you've lost that important thing, or even your child? That is what your Jesus, your Savior feels for you when you stray, when you become cold and apathetic in prayer and toward the Word, when you follow the footsteps of the world and the sinful flesh into the reach of that prowling lion, when you surround yourselves with wolves instead of the Shepherd's arms opened wide on the cross for your salvation and still now for your protection. Yet what rejoicing there is when you are found, when you return to the fold, when you resume your walk with the Shepherd to the heavenly pasture.

Let there be rejoicing in heaven and among us gathered today. Take your place in the fold, heed the Shepherd's voice, and let your heart's delight be the forgiveness that makes that possible, the forgiveness won when the Shepherd fought off the wolves with the wood of His cross and assured you when He walked out of the tomb that could not hold Him, smashing the prowling lion's teeth. So stay away from the devil's dentures. Stay put in the Shepherd's care. And stay steadfast in this truth, whatever the price, for Jesus' reward stored up for you in heaven is truly priceless. You are the lost sheep, the coin, the can, but He has sought you, has bought you with His blood, and in His Word He has taught you and will teach you to know His voice. Amen.