

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“I am the Bread of life,” says Jesus, **“the Light of the world, the Door of the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. I am the true Vine. The sheep, for whom I lay down My Life, know My Voice and I know them. They follow Me.”**

On this side of heaven, our faith lives alongside of doubt. The devil doesn't need to plant it in us. He just needs to water it. So, when we hear, **“My sheep know My Voice. They follow Me,”** it doesn't take much to get us thinking, **“Do I really know His Voice? Am I really following Him?”** Doubt wants proof. *Where should we look?* Doubt directs us to our lives. It says, **“If you really know and love Jesus you will do what He commands. He says they will know you by your love.”**

But how much have we done? How have we lived? Can we be recognized in this world, distinct from the rest of the world, by our love? No. So, repent. You have not been good enough, nor can you be good enough. Your life does not show your faith so much as it shows your sin. The world does not look at you and exclaim, **“My what a wonderful, generous, kind, loving person!”** We are a people of unclean lips.

So repent, but then tell doubt to shut up. Because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, He lays down His life for His sheep. He pays for your sins, your doubts. He ransoms you away from the Law. He has met His Father's wrath, satisfied justice on your behalf. There is no one left to accuse you. You are righteous and perfect because Jesus has declared you so. He has substituted His life for yours. He has risen from the dead for your justification. He is the Good Shepherd. He didn't only defeat death by His death, He also rose again to usher you into the green pastures of heaven, to bring

you home. He loves you. You know His voice. You hear it now. You love it.

It seems strange to us, but doubt is actually evidence of faith. Your doubts are the pin pricks of conscience. As your faith in Christ grows you become ever more aware of your sins and the weakness of your faith. You never doubt Zeus. You aren't worried about whether or not he is pleased with you or even whether or not he is real. *Why not?* Because he is not real. You do not believe in him. Your doubts about Our Lord are evidence that faith is living and fighting in you. In sense, you doubt Him and His Word, only because you believe in Him. Doubt is evidence that you are engaging the enemy inside yourself. If you were not engaging that enemy you would not care, you would not feel it. So you would feel no guilt or worry about it.

If this is hard for lay people to hear, it is torture for pastors. No faithful pastor in Christendom can hear Our Lord's words about hirelings and not squirm. For all fallen human pastors have counted the cost. We have all considered how we might package the message and have wasted huge amounts of mental energy in vain attempts to figure how to be successful and make the people like us. All of us pastors know who writes the checks.

But life in the Church Militant lives with this great mystery: **Our Lord delivers His gifts through earthen vessels. We hear the Shepherd's Voice out of the same mouth that gossips and slanders, brags and curses. We are instructed and admonished by imperfect persons, by sinners. Every faithful pastor knows he is a phony, a hypocrite of sorts, because he does not live up to his own preaching. He has not kept his vows. He is not knowable in this world by his love. He desires approval and loves the praise of men. Even if you are kind enough to love me, the world does not notice me. My love, my works, do not impress them.**

Yet we make our pastors promise to be faithful, to teach the truth, to uphold the Gospel in their lives and conduct. *What is the*

point of that? Sinners always break their promises. *Why require them to make vows we know they will not keep?* Because we want them to know when they've broken them. We don't want them pretending as though it was okay or normal or acceptable or didn't realize what was required of them. We want to drive home the point that this Office can only continue by grace, by supernatural intervention, that it is not effective by the will of men, but by the promise of God.

This doesn't just apply to pastor's. You have all stood up here and promised stuff you haven't kept. You have promised to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the faith. Imagine that! You've made huge, impossible promises at Confirmation, at your weddings, and at the baptism of your children. This hireling bit applies in the first place to pastors, to be sure, but it doesn't stop there. When the wolf comes, hirelings also run away from their wives, children, and neighbors. So, you can join me in my squirming.

Again, why the vows, if we know you will fail? It is so that you would be without excuse, so that you cannot plead ignorance, and that you would know that your faith, and your family, like unto your Church and the Ministry, exist and continue only by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, so that you would receive them as gifts. Our vows are more a confession than they are a promise. We confess what is good, what is right. We call upon the help of God and His promises to sustain us. Without grace, that is, without the undeserved love of God in Christ, we would be doomed.

But, we have the grace of God. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He has laid down His life for us. The promises of God are not about good sheep, but a Good Shepherd, who is faithful and steadfast, who has made a promise that cannot be broken. It is the promise of the Good Shepherd who cleanses and purifies us in Himself. Nothing can separate you from the love of God, not even your sins, your failures, your imperfect faith, your semi-broken vows, or your doubts. This is not your promise to keep. It is His. He has placed His promise upon you, baptized you into His Name

and Promise. He has pronounced His will for you. He would have you be a part of His flock and bring you to heaven. He has declared your future in His resurrection. Death has no claim upon you. Hell has no way to hold you. You are His beloved flock, clean and pure by grace, loved by Him without exception or condition, according to His will and Word. He laid down His life for the sins of all men, even for you. You are reconciled and His peace is for you.

You hear His Voice. You love it. You love Him. You are His sheep. You desire to be with Him. Even in the midst of your doubts, your struggles against the fallen flesh, you love Jesus. You rejoice in this forgiveness, in grace. You know the joy of it. Because you know your Shepherd and are known by Him. That is why you are here. You are gathered, brought together by Him. He comes to you in His Holy Supper. He feeds you with miraculous Bread from heaven, His very Body. He washes you in His Blood, which He pours out for you in the Holy Communion.

He is the Bread of Life, the Light of the world, the Door of the sheep, the Good Shepherd. He is the Resurrection, the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the true Vine. You are His fruit and His reward, His flock and His beloved. Rest in this peace and grace.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.