**April 26, 2015 – 4th Sunday in Easter**

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The fourth Sunday in Easter is always designated as Good Shepherd Sunday. In each of the three years of our lectionary, on this Sunday, we read a passage from chapter 10 of the Gospel of John. Last year, in Year A, we heard about Jesus as both the true shepherd who enters by the gate rather than sneaking over the wall, AND Jesus as the gate itself, there to protect the sheep. In Year C, next year, we’ll hear about Jesus as the shepherd whose voice his sheep recognize and follow.

And this year, Year B, we have probably the most famous sheep parable, Jesus as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his flock. I am so glad that we’re in Year B, because I think this passage is especially appropriate for the happy occasion of Andrew’s baptism.

In this passage, Jesus describes a good shepherd as one who lays down his life for his sheep. In fact, he says some form of “I lay down my life” no fewer than five times in these seven verses. John’s audience was primarily Jewish, and in Jewish writing repetition is often used to emphasize an important point, and the more repetitions the more important it is. So the Gospel writer repeating this passage five times is the equivalent of writing it in all caps, bold, AND underlining it.

So, focusing on those five repetitions for a second, two words stick out for me. The word for “life,” which is *psuche*, and the word for “to lay down,” which is *tithemi*. *Psuche* does mean life, but in the sense of identity or entire being, or even soul. It’s much more than just your heart beating and your lungs breathing. It’s the essence of who you are.

And *tithemi* means to lay down, but in the sense of placing or establishing. In other words, it has a permanence to it. When I hear the phrase “to lay down one’s life for someone” I always think of someone pushing someone else out of the way of a car, and getting hit himself. Or maybe stepping in front of a bullet to protect someone. Both of those scenarios are pretty permanent, but only on the part of the person who dies to save someone else, except maybe in memorials. It’s kind of a one shot deal.

*Tithemi* and *psuche* together mean a permanent, ongoing relationship. They mean putting your entire being in the service of another forever. And I can’t think of a better description of parenthood. As soon as that little baby makes an appearance, that bond between him and his parents is forged and is nearly unbreakable.

That’s what makes this Good Shepherd passage so beautiful. Imagine the loving connection that those of you who are parents have with your children. Even though he’s using sheep as his example, that’s the relationship Jesus is talking about here, with each of us. Jesus not only laid down his physical life for us, his flock, but he also shared his eternal life with us, too.

And that’s what’s so important about Baptism. Among other things, Baptism is our acknowledgement that Jesus gave us his life in every way, in order for us to be part of his Kingdom, his family. And it’s also us willingly putting our lives in God’s service and in the service of God’s people.

We all have a very important role to play in Andrew’s baptism today, and in his life in Christ. After his parents and godparents answer questions on Andrew’s behalf, the whole congregation is asked, “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in his life in Christ?”

All in your power! In other words, will you all, who witness this event today, lay down your lives for Andrew? This is pretty huge. Every time someone is baptized, we all agree to be in a permanent loving relationship with that person. In a sense, we’re all godparents.

And to further reinforce that relationship, we all reaffirm our own baptisms together with Andrew, which is really a restatement of the creed we say together every Sunday. But where the creed stops, we go on further:

* Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
* Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
* Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
* Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
* Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

And to each of these, we answer, “I will, with God’s help.” We are promising to lay down our lives for Andrew and for our neighbors, but we don’t have to do it alone. We will always have God’s help. We will always have Jesus, our Good Shepherd, protecting and guiding us. And we will always have the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, with us in our time of need.

In closing, in honor of Andrew’s baptism, and keeping in mind the Good Shepherd that Jesus is to us, I have taken the liberty of…reinterpreting…that most beloved of all Psalms, Psalm 23:

***Psalm 23 Revisited – For Andrew John***

*My mommy and my daddy are my shepherds, I shall not want.*

*They maketh me to lie down on fluffy blankets: they leadeth me into a warm bubbly bath.*

*They cuddle me when I cry: they’ll show me right from wrong when I get old enough to understand.*

*Yea, though I crawl through the valley of icky dreams and poopy diapers, I will fear no evil: for you’re both with me day and night and your arms and voices comfort me.*

*Mommy and Daddy, you feed me whenever I’m hungry and burp me when I’m full: you anointest me with baby oil, though not my head: you play patty cake with me and make me laugh.*

*Surely Mommy and Daddy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in their house forever, until I go away to college. But I’ll come back for holidays!*

The Lord IS our Good Shepherd, and all that’s his is ours. Listen for his loving voice, that we know so well, calling to us and promising us new life in him, and follow him into that loving and eternal relationship.

Amen.