

### ***Shepherds: the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly***

In the name of the Lord our Righteousness, dear friends in Christ: In today's Old Testament lesson we hear the word of the Lord through the prophet Jeremiah as he pronounces his scathing judgment on the shepherds of his people who are failing in their duties. They are scattering the sheep and not properly caring for them. The Lord declares that he will attend these rotten shepherds for their evil deeds. You know that won't be good for them. It will be for them a really bad day. The worst. But then the Lord promises that he will gather his scattered sheep and appoint for them good and faithful shepherds who will do the job right, and he appoint over them a righteous branch from the line of David who will reign as king over them all.

It is the fulfillment of this promise that we see illustrated in today's Gospel lesson, as Jesus takes five loaves of bread and two small fish, blesses them, and then places them in the hands of his disciples to distribute in order to feed a multitude. Exactly *how* this prophetic promise regarding shepherds and the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 are connected in this way may not be immediately obvious. It will require some explanation – but that's my job to do. So, I'll ask you to indulge me with your attention as we take a look at the shepherds of God's people: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Let's start with the good. You know the story: Jesus and his disciples have been working overtime. They're worn out and they need time for rest and recovery. So, Jesus directs them to pack up their things for a little mini-vacation. They pile into boat and attempt to slip out of Capernaum right as day is breaking – hopefully before anyone notices that they're leaving. Unfortunately, they don't make a clean get away. Many do see them leave. Word spreads. And soon, unbeknown to Jesus and his men, a large crowd is advancing along the shoreline to the place where they are heading. When they pull up on the beach expecting to find their intended campsite deserted, they find the multitude already waiting for them. The hearts of the disciples sink. This is what we were trying to get away from for a bit. But they know Jesus won't turn anyone away. He sees needy sheep without a shepherd. Immediately he begins to feed their hungry souls with his teaching.

The hours press on. Now it's getting late. The people who walked all left early, before their breakfast. And they didn't think or have time to pack a lunch or supper. So, now they're famished. The disciples see this as their chance to finally get away from the crowd. "Jesus, send them away to find food." "No, they don't need to do that. You feed them." "What? Are you out of your mind? It would cost a small fortune to feed them all." "Well, what have you got on hand. Go and see." "Right. We did the inventory. All we've got are five little pita loaves and two small fish. That's not even enough for us much less this mob." "You think so? I think it's plenty. Hand them over to me. And direct these folks to sit down on the grass in groups."

Jesus lifts his eyes to heaven, blesses the skimpy meal, and distributes its contents to his disciples. All at once their little baskets seem to have no bottoms. Every time they put their hands in there, there's more food. It never runs out. It's amazing. They hand out bread and fish to everyone, as much as they want and more. Their cup – or in this case their baskets – overfloweth. Too bad no one thought to bring a skin of wine. That would have made this a real party. Anyway, after all are fed and satisfied, Jesus tells his men to gather up the fragments. We don't want to be wasteful. They come back to him with twelve full baskets.

That's the miracle. But the miracles of Jesus are always more than displays of divine power; they mean something or they point to something greater. In this case it's not hard to see what. The key to deciphering it lies in the numbers which are all theologically loaded with meaning. Take the five loaves. Ask any first century Jew what five stands for, and he'd answer the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses – and by extension, the entire written Word of God. That fits perfectly, because there's a close biblical connection between bread and God's Word – as in "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." And the two fish? Well, what are the two "fleshly" things that accompany God's Word to feed his people? Oh, that would be the two Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It's also worth noting that five and two together make seven – a number closely associated with the Church and such themes as rest, forgiveness, and God's covenant of grace.

So, here's the picture: in the not too distant future, Jesus will be removing his visible presence from this earth. Before his departure, he will charge his disciples (who will by then be his apostles) to feed his sheep and take care of his lambs. And all they will have with which to do it are the five loaves and two fish: God's Word and Sacraments. It doesn't look like much. But in the hands of Jesus and blessed by him, it will be a feast for a multitude – an unending source of nourishment. They will go forth to do this work, feeding the five thousand: five referring to God's Word times 1000, which signifies fullness or completion; so, the whole number of people who hear the Word of God. And what comes back to Jesus then are twelve, a number that represents the chosen people of God – as in the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve chosen disciples. It's the number of the saved.

Got the picture? It's an illustration of Christ's Church and his ministry through his appointed shepherds. It's the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy, when the Lord appoints for his people good shepherds who will care for them and feed them properly. And what makes them good shepherds is that they know they serve *the* Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for the sheep and rose from the dead, and who now places in their hands nothing – *nothing* – except the five loaves and the two fish that Jesus has blessed in order to feed the sheep that he's assigned them to care for. So, they study God's Word daily, because they know that's what their sheep live on. And they administer the Sacraments faithfully, because they are the beginning and the continuing lifeblood of Christ's Church

Those are the good shepherds. Let's talk about the bad. In Jeremiah's day, there were a lot of them. And there are a lot of ways to perform the shepherd's task badly. There's simple laziness and neglect, for example. These are the shepherds who are inattentive to their duties. They are fairly easy to spot. Far more damaging to the flock, however, are the shepherds who feel they must change what's in the basket they've been given to care for the sheep – either adding to it or subtracting from it. Some look at what they've got to work with and decide there's not enough in there to feed the sheep, so they add their own ideas or philosophies or techniques – or those they've heard and learned from others. They lay additional burdens on their sheep, telling them that in order to attain salvation they've got to perform certain tasks or deny themselves certain of life's pleasures in order to reach a higher level of holiness. Thus they abuse their sheep and cause them to live in fear.

Worse still are the shepherds who take away from what they've been given to care for their sheep. They think, "If I tell teach them this truth of God, they'll be angry with me. They won't like me or follow me. So, I'll tell them what they'd rather hear." St. Paul, in his second letter to Timothy describes such shepherds. He writes, "For a time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into

myths.” This was the big problem in Jeremiah’s time. Most of the shepherds of God’s people were allowing, no, even *encouraging* them to participate in all the immoral ways and idolatry of the pagan nations. Thus, instead of gathering the people to the Lord, they were driving them away from him—not physically, mind you; they still gathered the people together and acted like they were serving the Lord. But spiritually they were far from him. They were bad shepherds.

But bad shepherds are formed in different ways. Some are weak, caring more for their popularity and earthly well being than for the truth of God. Others are badly trained or deceived. They think they are doing the job right. They are sincere; but they are sincerely wrong. They don’t know they are hurting rather than helping the sheep.

Ugly shepherds are those who are outright conmen. They use their appointment as shepherd to fleece the flock and stuff their face with lamb chops, so to speak. They know they are doing evil. They don’t care. In the Old Testament the two wicked sons of Eli come to mind as prime examples. Supposedly serving along side of their father, who was the high priest of Israel, they stole from the sacrifices that were to be offered to the Lord and they fornicated with the women who served in various capacities around the temple. They were unbelievers, with no fear of the Lord. But through their actions they made the worship of the Lord appear to be a farce. They drove people away from him in disgust. They were ugly shepherds.

Okay, so we’ve got shepherds: the good, the bad, and the ugly. The Lord has promised always to provide for his people good shepherds who will properly care for them. But it’s vital that you, God’s people – or metaphorically the sheep – know how to identify them because the bad and the ugly shepherds are still out there and will be until Christ comes again.

A good shepherd confines his ministry to God’s Word. That’s what he feeds his people: the whole counsel of God, not adding to it or subtracting from it. He proclaims the Law of God in all its fury, never sugar-coating it or watering it down. He convicts you of your sins and shows you your lost condition. And he proclaims the pure Gospel of Christ Jesus, God’s Son, crucified for sinners and raised for their justification. He rightly divides the Word of God, showing you that you stand before the Lord in Christ’s righteousness alone and not by any merit or effort on your part. He shows you your salvation in Christ alone. And he properly administers Christ’s Sacraments, teaching their powerful truths and performing them with due reverence. That’s what a good shepherd does.

I hasten to add that even the best shepherd is a fallen human sinner who can and will make mistakes, at times fail in his duty, and be neglectful of God’s flock. This is why I covet your prayers on my behalf and behalf of all those who serve the Good Shepherd as ministers of his Church. Pray that Christ make and keep us good shepherds for the benefit of his people and the greater glory of God. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***