In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Sunday in the liturgical year – the Fourth Sunday of Easter – is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.” That is because, year after year, the appointed Gospel Lesson is from St. John Chapter 10, about the Good Shepherd. And the appointed Psalm for the day is always the beloved Twenty-Third Psalm. I bet Good Shepherd Lutheran Churches all across the land are happy on this day to have Bible readings that so well fit the name of their churches.

For my sermon text this morning I have chosen the opening verse from our Gospel Lesson. Jesus says this:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11, RSV)

If I could choose one hymn title to express the theme of this sermon it would be the hymn we have just sung, “What Wondrous Love Is This.” What wondrous love indeed! Let me tell you about it.

Recently I stood on the subway platform watching the train as it approached. Car after car went by me, all of them full of people, both sitting and standing up, elbow to elbow. But then I noticed one car that was about three quarters full, with people both sitting and standing elbow to elbow, but with the front quarter of the car pretty empty. When the train stopped, I was close to that car so I hastened into it. There I found a homeless man asleep on the bench near the front of the car. His cart was full of his possessions. He himself was covered up by a blanket. And waves of an ill smell came from the man huddled there on the bench. People were not mad at the man. They did not cast angry glances at him. They simply stood or sat as far away from him as they could.

And I thought to myself, God loves this man! Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for this man.

Such love is nigh incomprehensible! It is hard to figure out. What kind of love is it that can lead such a good man as Jesus of Nazareth to die for a man huddled in such dirty and foul-smelling robes? But then, Jesus knows the beginning from the end. Perhaps if we knew the entirety of this man’s story, we too would love the man, we too would have compassion on him, we too would sacrifice some of our life for him.

I mean to return to this poor man huddled in his dirty robes. I need to return to him because we are he! Compared to our beautiful Savior, Jesus
Christ, you and I at our best are still sinners wrapped up in dirty and foul-smelling robes.

For now, let’s return to our Gospel story and our sermon text. Jesus says this:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. (John 10:11, RSV)

I love sermons about the sheep, about how defenseless they are, having no claws or horns, and how bewildered they are without the shepherd. They seem to have no nose for water. If they get lost they just go on straying – can’t find their way back home. I like the sheep because they are such innocent creatures. They do not roar like the lion, they do not attack like the panther, they do not creep into the henhouse and kill the hens like the fox. In my mind, sheep are likable creatures.

But what I want to point out in this sermon is how very different the sheep are from the shepherd. On the one hand you have this woolly sheep, God bless him, and on the other hand you have the shepherd, a human being. They are different sorts of creatures. The human being has a conscience. The human being is addressed by God, with the word of God resting in the heart of each person, and calling him or her onwards toward love. The shepherd is the kind of creature who could lay down his life for the sheep. The sheep cannot do that for the shepherd. They are simply different kinds of creatures. There’s a gap between the shepherd and the sheep. Yet a good shepherd is willing to die for the sheep. All the hopes and dreams that the shepherd has for his future... he is willing to lay them all down for the sake of the flock. He is willing to sacrifice his life for a creature very unlike him.

Jesus loves us before we are lovable. His love races ahead of who we are, of what we have done, of what we might be doing still. His love speeds ahead of our mistakes, of our sins, of our regrets. Like an arrow his love flies ahead beyond the ways in which we have disappointed him, marred our records, and soiled our souls. Bad deeds or performances in our lives so far cannot obscure from Jesus that he loves us. He sees something in us that we ourselves might not yet see. He sees strength and nobility and dignity and loving hearts in us that we ourselves might not yet perceive, or have given up on. He sees us as he and the Father and the Holy Spirit want us to be. He sees the glorious human being huddled under the foul-smelling robes, and he loves that person. He wants that person to come forth from the rags, to hold his head up, to hold her head up, and to begin walking with the dignity and loving hearts we were meant for from the beginning. And with God on our side this is possible for each of us. Do not doubt that. Do not exclude yourself from the love of Jesus for humanity. When Jesus says that the good Shepherd lays
down his life for the sheep, you and I might as well joyfully cry Baaa, and
count ourselves among his flock.

Let me try another way to express this ability of Jesus to love us even
before we are lovable. I am thinking of Martin Luther’s great treatise called
“On the Freedom of a Christian” (1520). I could go on and on quoting from
this magnificent treatise about what Luther calls the “blessed exchange”
between Christ and the sinner. He speaks of faith in Christ as a marriage
between Christ and the sinner – a marriage that is so much to the advantage
of the sinner. Listen to a few lines from this great treatise. He is speaking of
the relationship between Christ and the Church—the Bride of Christ:

Who then can fully appreciate what this royal marriage
means? Who can understand the riches of the glory of this
grace? Here this rich and divine bridegroom Christ
marries this poor, wicked harlot, redeems her from all her
evil, and adorns her with all his goodness. Her sins cannot
now destroy her, since they are laid upon Christ and
swallowed up by him. And she has that righteousness in
Christ, her husband, of which she may boast as of her own
and which she can confidently display alongside her sins
in the face of death and hell and say, “If I have sinned, yet
my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned, and all his is
mine and all mine is his,” as the bride in the Song of
Solomon [2:16] says, “My beloved is mine and I am his.”

It is as if Jesus notices the poor man huddled under his blanket on the
subway. He goes up to him, shakes his shoulder a bit, wakes him up and
exchanges the man’s dirty and foul-smelling rags for his garments brighter
than the sun, whiter than any fuller on earth can wash them. He takes the few
nickels and quarters in the man’s pocket and in exchange gives him all the
gold and silver and cattle on a thousand hills. Jesus wears the rags of the poor
man and accepts the distance other people want from the poor man, and he
bids the poor man to stride forth proudly, with every chance in the world to
start living a good life and to have the respect of the world. What a blessed
exchange! What wondrous love is this! If you and I should be poor sinners in
any measure, our Lord Jesus wants to accept us, forgive us, and launch us out
into a world that needs us.

I end with St. John’s exhortation that we should imitate Jesus. The
stunning words of the apostle go this way. This is from our Epistle Lesson,
from First John Chapter 3:
We know love by this, that he [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. (1 John 3:16, NRSV)

St. John is pulling no punches here. Jesus has saved us with the hope that we will turn around and save others.

But we need not necessarily die in order to help save others. The apostle makes that clear. Immediately after saying that “we ought to lay down our lives for one another,” he illustrates what that is like by speaking of something within the reach of many of us: he speaks of charity and compassion. He asks a rhetorical question—heart-searching question. It goes this way:

How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? (1 John 3:17, NRSV)

Let us not refuse to help. Let us not return the love of Jesus for us and his high hopes for us with coldness of heart and indifference toward others. Rather, let us, as the apostle puts it, “love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” following the example of our Lord and Savior and Good Shepherd Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.