

“Jesus Shepherds”

The disciples of Jesus are right when they say that, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late.” It’s been a long day. The disciples are exhausted.

They’ve just returned from doing the work Jesus had sent them out to do – preaching and teaching and casting out demons and healing the sick. They’ve just returned from the difficult task of burying the head-less body of John the Baptist. Jesus Himself has told them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.”

They’ve been through a lot. They need rest. So, it doesn’t seem out of bounds when they come to Jesus and say to Him – “Send [the crowds] away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

That may sound right to us – but this is divine revelation – God revealing to us (through His Word) WHO He is and WHAT He’s up to! This is about the Kingdom of God – how He rules and reigns over all things – His economy, and how it works with Him.

This isn’t just a story about what Jesus and 12 men (and a crowd of more than 5,000) were doing in Galilee around the year 31 AD. It is a microcosm of what Jesus, the Christ, is doing, even now – in 2024, in Eagle, NE – in the midst of this “less-than-5,000” crowd gathered here today.

“And when it grew late, His disciples came to Him and said, ‘This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.’”

“Send them away”? This massive crowd, whom Jesus has compassion on and describes as being “like sheep without a shepherd” – send them away? Scatter the sheep into the surrounding countryside and villages? Send them away from the Psalm 23 “the Lord is my Shepherd” Jesus – the Good Shepherd Jesus? Send them away to find their own green pastures and still waters – to fend off the wolves by themselves?

Granted, the disciples are tired, exhausted – they needed some rest. There is some wisdom in saying they need to be taken care of, if they are going to care for others.

But that wisdom suggests that THEY are the answer to the problem – the solution to the situation at hand. While we may appreciate many of the reasons given to send them away – in the end, the sheep are being sent away from Jesus.

Let them “go into the surrounding countryside and villages.” There are other options for these people to be fed – let them find food elsewhere. You know what that’s like today – surrounded by so many other ways for people to be spiritual, devoted, to worship in their own ways.

Some are devoted to animal rescue – and some are devoted to their club team. Some prefer to be spiritual at home – and some prefer to be spiritual in nature. People find many other things to worship.

And you’ve heard the responses (or said them yourself). “At least they’re doing something good” – “at least they believe in something” – “at least they’re praying” – “at least they’re serving their neighbor” – “at least they’re going to church.”

“At least” is not what the Lord desires for His sheep. The surrounding countryside and villages may contain many options – but there is only one option for God’s people – only one option for life and salvation --- so do not send them away.

Let them go “and buy themselves something to eat.” Do you send your young child into the grocery store with a \$20 bill and tell them to buy themselves something to eat? I’d probably come out with a bag of Doritos, a container of cashews and a Diet Coke. But remember, we’re not talking about food for the belly – we’re talking about the Kingdom of God.

The suggestion to go and “buy for yourself” runs contrary to the Lord and His ways. It doesn’t square with Isaiah 55 where the Lord says – “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price ...” (v.1).

“Buy for yourselves” is contrary to the Gospel – it’s tantamount to saying “shepherd yourself” or “save yourself.” It doesn’t matter how many options there are – it doesn’t matter how many loaves and fish you have – you cannot “buy for yourselves.”

This is why Jesus sees the crowds and has compassion on them – they are like sheep without a shepherd. Left to themselves, the best that man comes up with is – “Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

In God’s Kingdom, in Christ’s Church – there are shepherds – divinely appointed and authorized shepherds. As Jeremiah 23 says – “I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord.”

That’s what a pastor is, a “shepherd.” The Lord gives to His Church pastors – not “do it yourself options” – sheep shepherding themselves at home – Everyone a Minister – and the ever popular “tailor-made Christianity.”

No, a shepherd is given to care for the flock – because it is Jesus the Good Shepherd who is doing the shepherding. He is the One who is at work through the mouth and hands of the Twelve Apostles, and the pastors of His Church today.

Jesus sends out Twelve men – but it is He who is preaching and teaching and casting out demons and healing the sick. Jesus gathers the flock of 5,000 and feeds them. It is Jesus who shepherds you, His flock, today.

Jesus takes the bread, looks up to heaven and gives thanks, breaks the bread – and gives it to His pastor to set before you. It is “for you” – Jesus “for you” – His resurrected Body and Blood to resurrect you – His forgiveness for your sins.

And what He gives is sufficient to satisfy the whole Church – signified by the twelve baskets full of bread and fish. His coming to you – His compassion for you – His way of working for your salvation is sufficient to satisfy you, and His whole flock – now, and forevermore. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.