Ordained to Die
St. John 10:1-16

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (St. John 10:11)

It is a festive day for you Christopher, Evelyn and your children as this day marks for you the culmination of a path that led you from a life and career in Boston to studies at our seminary in Fort Wayne with a vicarage year in Raleigh. You have been examined and declared ready to serve the Lord’s flock, you have been called and today you are ordained as pastor in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and installed as shepherd of Holy Trinity congregation. Likewise this is a day of rejoicing for the Lord’s people here in Columbia for the Lord of the church has answered your prayer. He has sent you a man to be your pastor. But with all the celebration that attends this day, the Scriptures interject a sobering, yes even morbid note, for Jesus says that the good shepherd, the good pastor, lays down his life for the sheep.

A friend of mine observes that “Christian worship is for dead people. It comes out of the liturgy of the burial of the dead” (Steven Paulson, “What is Essential in Lutheran Worship?” Word & World Spring 2005, 154). Have you ever thought of that? The basic form for Christian liturgy is the burial of the dead for that is how God finds us. He finds us as spiritual corpses, dead as a doornail in trespasses and sin. And with the word of absolution, the forgiveness of sins, He calls us out of the grave and into life. So the whole rhythm of the Christian life is death and resurrection. The Catechism reminds us that ‘the old Adam in us should, by daily contrition and repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts and again, a new man daily come forth and arise, who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.’

The life of discipleship is always cruciform in shape. All Christians are called by the Lord Jesus Christ to take up their cross and follow Him. When Jesus Christ calls a man, said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, He bids him come and die. Our various vocations in the world are the places where God erects a cross so that we die to self and sin. Luther reminds us that we don’t go out and make a cross for ourselves but that wherever the gospel is preached and believed, there the holy cross will follow. The location for cross-bearing is in our vocations- in happens in congregations where we live as either preachers or hearers of the Word of God, in families where we live as husbands or wives, parents or children, in communities where we live as citizens or leaders, and in the workplace where we live as employees or employers. All these places in life, Luther reminds us, are genuine holy orders established by God and sanctified by His Word.
But today, this ordination Sunday, our attention is directed toward one particular vocation, the preaching office. The office that Christ Jesus Himself has established so that people might hear the word of the Gospel that alone creates faith. This office is also shaped by the cross. Lutheran pastors are theologians of the cross. We preach Christ and Him crucified. But such preaching is more than speaking about the cross. As Hermann Sasse puts it “to confess the cross is to carry the cross.” Those men who are sent as Christ’s ambassadors, to stand in the stead and by the command of the Lord as undershepherds of the Good Shepherd are to lay down their lives for sheep. Ordination, Christopher, is marking you for such a life.

Of course, Christopher, your life has never been your own. Not really. It has always belonged by virtue of creation to the God who made you. It has always belonged to the Lord who purchased and won you not with gold or silver, but with His precious blood and innocent suffering. It belongs to the Lord from your Baptism, where He claimed you in body and soul as a dwelling place, a temple of His Holy Spirit. Today the Lord lays yet another claim on you as He makes of you a pastor in His church. This is not a status of superior spirituality or advanced holiness, but one of servanthood. You are committed to the office of shepherd to feed and care for the sheep that belong to Christ Jesus. And in this charge there is death. If our vocations are the places where God puts the old Adam to death, then the pastoral office is where you will lay down your life for the sheep.

Now make no mistake about it, there is only one Calvary is all of history. It is there that the Son who was send by the Father as the apostle of our salvation, laid down His life to redeem the world in that one perfect and complete sacrifice. It is not your calling, Christopher, to be the Savior. Only He could and would die for our sins. It is your calling to be His mouth in speaking His words of spirit and life, His hands in baptizing and distributing His body and blood, and His feet in seeking out the straying and the lost. And that work, will be the death of you!

Jesus speaks the words of our text on the other side of Good Friday as He has set His face to the cross and with steady determination moves toward that hour of His being lifted up on its hard beams to draw all people to Himself. After Easter, when Jesus has a seaside breakfast with His disciples, He commissions Peter to feed His lambs and tend His sheep. Then the Lord speaks those strange words to Peter telling him that when he was young he dressed himself and went about as he pleased. But Jesus says “when you are old, you will stretch out your hands and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go” (John 21:18). Then the Evangelist John adds that Jesus said this to show what kind of death Peter was to glorify God. Jesus’ hands were stretched out and nailed to the cross. Those who follow Him will be stretched out, too. Perhaps not in martyrdom such as that of Peter but certainly in the daily dying that characterizes the Christian life, the baptismal life.

The place of your dying, Christopher, is in the pastoral office. The Apostle Paul describes pastoral dying like this: We are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being
given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you” (II Cor. 410-12).

You cannot choose its shape or size. But the cross will come to those who feed and tend Christ’s holy sheep. It is part of the territory. Don’t be surprised or caught off guard but look to Him who is the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. For He bore your sins in his body on the tree that you might die to sin and live to righteousness. “By his wounds you have been healed” (I Peter 2:24).

By His wounds you know Jesus to be the Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep. With the sight of nail scarred hands and spear-pierced side, Jesus’ breath and words made of Peter and the others apostles. Sent by the Father they speak the words that forgive sins. The Word is the voice of the Good Shepherd and His sheep hear that voice and follow Him out of death into life. They give the gifts Christ has bestowed on them to distribute. They feed the flock purchased with Christ’s own blood. They tend the sheep, not only pasturing them with the food of God’s Word but also guarding and defending them from the satanic schemes of false shepherds who come to scatter and destroy with their poisoned teachings.

It is for this work that God gives pastors to His church. Pastors feed and tend God’s sheep. The layman C.S.Lewis once quipped that he wished the clergy in his own Anglican Church would remember that Christ’s words to Peter were not “teach my dogs new tricks but feed my sheep.” Good advice for us as well. Christ did not place pastors in His church to experiment with the sheep, organize the sheep into seminars so that they might be more effective in their sheepishness, promote an “every sheep a shepherd” emphasis, or entertain the sheep but to feed the sheep and tend to the sheep as men who must one day give account.

Whoever aspires to the office of bishop aspires to a noble task wrote the Apostle Paul. Indeed it is a noble task to feed God’s flock with the precious food of the Gospel and the body and blood of Christ. Surely it is a noble task to guard and tend the flock that Christ has purchased with His own blood. But it is a demanding task. It took Peter’s life. It is a task that will take your life, Christopher. Perhaps not on an upside down cross but in daily dying, the thousand little deaths that come in the course of faithfulness to your vocation. A cross awaits you as well. But with the cross, also the resurrection for in the economy of the Triune God, we live by dying. Your sufficiency is not in yourself but in the promises of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. So embrace the office that is committed to you his day, Christopher, in the confidence that your future and future of God’s flock here at Holy Trinity is laid wide open in Easter’s vacant tomb for the Good Shepherd has laid down His life for the sheep and raised from the dead, He lives never to die again. That is confidence enough for both pastor and people so we say to you, Christopher: “Preach you the Word and plant it home and never faint; the Harvest Lord who gave the sower seed to sow will watch and tend his planted Word.” (LW 259:5) Amen.
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