

I

The diplomas had been handed out, the hoods had been awarded, but the graduation ceremony was entering its third hour and showed no signs of ending soon. The Reverend Doctor Tara Bulger leaned over and whispered to me, “This is no longer a graduation ceremony – it’s a hostage crisis!”

On Thursday morning this week, our youngest son Joshua graduated from the Weekday School of First Presbyterian Church. It was a sweet ceremony, with just the right mix of singing, smiling, and celebrating, and Elaine Johnson and the Weekday School faculty are such excellent shepherds of our children and their families.

This is a season of graduations and commencements, especially in this community. I happened to be passing by the Arch on Broad Street last week, and I saw students lined up to take pictures in their caps and gowns, and the smiles on their faces could have lit up Chicago.

II

And rightly so. Because to graduate from anything, from preschool all the way up to graduate school, means that you have followed a prescribed course of study. You have shown up for class. You have read the assignments. You have done the homework. You have completed the papers and projects and passed the exams. And in exchange for all those hours of work and effort and toil, you get a certificate suitable for

framing, and the right to call yourself a graduate.

That’s how our system is designed. Show up. Do the work. Get the reward – whether it’s a promotion to the next grade or rank or a diploma or a paycheck.

III

But I wonder – does God operate on the same basic transactional model? Is that how it works with the things of God – show up to worship and Sunday School, do the work, give generously, and you’ll get promoted to the next level – and if you work hard enough and do all the projects and pass all the tests, when you breathe your last and “graduate”, you’ll get to stand at the “arch,” smiling from ear to ear?

That sounds lovely and even reasonable, until you consider one little problem. Of all the human beings who have ever lived, and of all the human beings who ever will live, only one has ever passed the course – Jesus of Nazareth. Everyone else has failed. It didn’t matter how many degrees they had. It didn’t matter what race or gender or nationality or sexuality or even what religion they practiced – because what caused the failure for them, and what causes the failure for you and me, is this thing called sin.

Contrary to popular belief, sin is not just the seven deadly sins made famous years ago by Brad Pitt and Morgan Freeman. Sin is not just an

action. It's a condition of the human heart. Sin is anything that separates us from the perfect goodness of God.

And so consequently, it cannot be overcome like calculus and chemistry. There are no tutors or learning centers that can help us, because it affects every single person on earth. Even though we mean well, and despite our best intentions and best efforts, over and over and over again, our sin causes us to fail and to fall short of the glory of God.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: I do not understand my own actions. The good I would do, I do not, and the evil I would not do, I do.¹ And we've all been there, haven't we? We've all done something or said something that felt just right at the time, and then later realized that we have fallen short once again of the glory of God? And we've all committed sins of omission – we've not done something or not said something we know we should have, and then later come to regret it.

So if we're so completely entangled by our own sin that we'll never pass the course, that we'll never completely satisfy the commandments to love God and love our neighbor as we love ourselves, what can be done about it?

Our text this morning comes from the tenth chapter of the gospel according to John. In John's gospel, it's not so much the narrative and the plot

that drives the action, but rather dialogue, discourse, and metaphors.

And in this chapter, Jesus refers to himself as "The Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep." He says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand."

"I am the Good Shepherd," says Jesus. "The Lord is my shepherd," says the psalmist.

I grew up in the suburbs, pretty much a city kid. But you don't have to be in 4H or the president of Future Farmers of America to know that sheep are not the brightest of God's creatures. They're noisy. They spook easily. And they have a tendency to butt heads with one another.

And yet, Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

The sheep are loved by the Shepherd not because they're the smartest of God's creatures. The sheep are guarded by the Shepherd not because they're the sweetest of God's creatures. The sheep are cherished by the Shepherd not because they're somehow better or more worthy of love and protection than any of the other creatures.

¹ Romans 7:19

The sheep are loved and guarded and cherished by the Shepherd not because the sheep are good, *but because he is*. They *belong* to him, and he lays down his life *for them*.

IV

You are loved and cherished and guarded by the Good Shepherd, my sister, not because of any course you passed, not because of any degree you've earned, not because of any prayer you may have once said, not because of any sacrament that you've received, but you are loved and cherished and guarded and protected because of who God is in Jesus Christ.

You are loved and cherished and guarded by the Good Shepherd, my brother, not because of who you are, but because of what God has done for you on the cross and in the empty tomb of Jesus Christ.

There is no prayer you can say that will make God love you more than God already does. There is no class you can take or sacrament you can receive that will promote you up the ladder. Because of sin, you have no chance of ever passing the course. And so in the cross and empty tomb of Jesus of Nazareth, God did for you what you could never have done for yourself, no matter how hard you might try. That's why they call the gospel of Jesus Christ Good News.

And because the Lord is your shepherd, you shall not want. The Lord

is your shepherd, and therefore no one will ever be able to snatch you out of the shepherd's hand. There is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.²

V

So the question for us is not, "What must we do to become God's people?" The question is, "How are we going to live differently in light of the Good News that *we are and always will be God's people?*"

Most of you know that I grew up in cattle country. To this very day, twice a day, there is an honest to goodness cattle drive in the Fort Worth Stock Yards, with cowboys and horses and hats and chaps and longhorns and the whole bit. It's a great photo opportunity for out of town guests.

But isn't it interesting that Jesus doesn't call himself the Good Cowboy? There were cattle in Jesus' day. Jesus could have easily said, "I am the Good Cowboy."

But there are some important differences between sheep and cattle. Cattle are driven from behind, whereas sheep are led from out front. Cattle are branded on their hides so they can be identified in case they get mixed up with other herds.

² Romans 8:38-39

But sheep know the voice of their shepherd. All he has to do call, and they follow him as he leads.

Jesus didn't say to Peter and the fishermen, "Get along little doggies. Go out there and change the world, and I'll be hanging back here in the rear pushing you along."

He said, "Come follow me," and he led them.

We are bombarded by so many voices and whistles and calls these days, friends. Voices that shout at us about what we should buy and for whom we should vote and what we should eat, and the list goes on and on. It's easy for us to get mixed up and turned around and frightened and spooked in this crazy world.

But we belong to the Good Shepherd. We are his, and we know his voice. We hear it every time we open his Word. We hear it every time we gather together as his people.

So may we follow as he leads us, not only as he leads beside the still waters, but yes, even through the very valley of the shadow of death.

We need fear no evil, for the Good Shepherd is on watch. The Good Shepherd is Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Today is Mother's Day, and I still remember the voice of my mother calling after me whenever I would leave the house. She would call out, "Remember who you are," and then

she'd say, "And use your best judgment!"

May we remember who and whose we are, and may act like it, because we are and always will belong to The Good Shepherd.

Thanks be to God.