

Shepherds, Sheep, And The Word

Mark 6:30-34

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

July 22, 2018 – Ninth Sunday After Pentecost



In the name of the Father, and of † the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Sheep without a shepherd. The very notion of this deeply troubled the heart of our Lord Jesus. In fact His heart went out to such sheep as He looked out over a great multitude of them in this morning's Gospel and considered their dilemma. He knows, better than anyone, the dangers that beset sheep who don't have a faithful shepherd. Some will be devoured by wolves. Others will be consumed by neglect and starvation. And still others will be lost to their own wandering ways. If a man has a hundred sheep, says Jesus, and loses one, will he not leave the ninety-nine to go after the one so that it will no longer be lost? Not many shepherds will do this, but of course our Good Shepherd Jesus will, because He knows full well what will happen to that one lost sheep when the flock has no shepherd. He knows what will happen to the flock when a wolf dressed in sheep's clothing seeks to devour them by means of heresy and false doctrine.

The warnings and promises of God's Word are different for shepherds than for sheep because of their appointed place in the kingdom. Shepherds and sheep share in many of the same sins, even as they share in the same corrupt nature of Adam. But there are certain temptations and sins that beset one more than the other because of the place they fill in the Churchly order of things. Shepherds, for instance, sin when they fail to teach their flock what is necessary to guard and protect them from the wolves who would ravage and scatter them. They sin also when they fail to teach how important it is that sheep not wander from the flock – that is, away from the truth. Sheep, on the other hand, sin when they refuse to listen to the sound teaching of their faithful shepherd. And they sin, as well, when they fail to judge rightly whether what their shepherd teaches is actually in accord with the Word of God.

Jesus, of course, came into the world as the Good Shepherd, the One who would lay down His

life for the sheep. Unlike the hireling, Jesus came with a vested interest in this flock which, from eternity, has been His very own prized possession. As their Shepherd, Jesus leads His sheep to lie down in green pastures and guides them beside the still waters. Though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death they fear no evil for they know He will guard, protect and comfort them. He calls His sheep by name and they listen to Him. They listen because they know the sound of His voice. The Gospel of salvation, the free gift of God's grace in Christ Jesus, is a sweet sound unlike any other in all the world. No other god, no other leader, no other shepherd can or will give them what the Good Shepherd gives to those who labor and are heavy laden – who come for rest and to learn from Him.

And because this is so, Jesus teaches His sheep many things concerning God's Word, because teaching God's Word is part of the office – what faithful shepherds do for their sheep. When St. Paul wrote to Timothy about the qualifications for a man who desires to be an overseer – that is, a pastor and a shepherd – he said he must be “able to teach.” In like fashion, when Paul sent Timothy out as a pastor, he charged him, saying: “Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” A shepherd of God's people must not strive to lead with cleverly devised tactics or programs, but only with sound teaching based solely on the Word of God – teaching that rightly divides Law and Gospel. This is essential, not because knowledge saves you from the consequence of your sin, but because knowledge forms the foundation upon which your faith is built. That's why “these things are written, that you may know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and that by believing in Him you might have life in His name” – because “God would have all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.”

So Jesus, the one and only Good Shepherd, when He saw this leaderless, wandering flock, readily took on the task of teaching them. And as He taught, they found in Him a Shepherd who would lead them from this vale of tears to the life of that world to come. They found in Him a Shepherd who would give His life to protect them – who would die that they might live – a Shepherd whose voice they could trust.

Consider the end of John's Gospel, where Jesus restores Peter to the faith. I've always appreciated this text because I can relate – as I'm sure many of you also can – with Peter's wandering ways. Remember, on the night of Jesus' trial Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus! So, after our Lord rose from the dead He met with Peter and asked him, saying: "Do you love Me more than these?" Three times Jesus asked, and three times Peter responded: "Lord, you know I love You." And each time Peter responded, Jesus said to him: "Tend My sheep...Feed My sheep...Follow Me." And it was then that Peter took up the mantle of a shepherd, following Jesus even to a cross where he met his own end and was crucified upside down. Peter learned that to be a shepherd one must also learn how to tend, feed, and teach God's sheep – feeding them with nothing but the good food of God's unchanging Word.

But I fear I've said too much about shepherds and not enough about sheep. However, in a sense, any examination of that office which shepherds and pastors hold should also be important to the sheep entrusted to their care. For as our first Synodical President, Dr. C.F.W. Walther, once wrote, it is vitally necessary that the sheep – being intimately familiar themselves with the teaching of God's Word – must therefore judge the teaching of their shepherds according to that Word. Jesus, the Good Shepherd – working by the power of the Holy Spirit in Word, water, bread and wine – has transferred each of you from the kingdom of darkness into His kingdom of light. In Baptism He has made you His own. He has given you His Word to sustain you, and sent under-shepherds to proclaim the Gospel, the Good News of the forgiveness of sins. And He has called you to judge the voice of your shepherd, not by some arbitrary standard of your own choos-

ing, or even by what you think about him as a person, but solely according to the pure, unadulterated Word of God.

Many of us, looking out over our Church body, the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, have grieved for her, because in some ways we have wandered from God's Word, or at the very least have failed to stand up when we should have in order to say: "Thus sayeth the Lord." To some degree the fault for this lies with lazy preachers who would rather read about the newest techniques in "growing the Church" than about theology and how to properly apply it to the lives of God's people. But make no mistake, the reason they've been able to do this is because the sheep under their care have failed in their task of judging their shepherds. Far too many sheep have contented themselves with milk when they should have moved on to meat and potatoes – when they should have been wrestling with God's Word and its teachings. And I suspect strongly that this judgment would also apply to each and every one of us, as well.

In this morning's Gospel, the multitudes over whom Jesus had compassion, found themselves shepherd-less because they followed those who had led them astray. They followed those who had abandoned sound teaching – those who had forsaken the pure Gospel – who themselves no longer listened to the voice of the Good Shepherd. And when Jesus saw them, He knew there was only one way to bring them back. So, "He began to teach them many things." As we move forward from this point your prayer needs to be that when our Lord speaks, He would grant you willingness to listen, and a burning desire to discern truth from error – that He would give you ears attuned to the voice of the Good Shepherd – ears ready *and willing* to hear His voice. His voice is really unmistakable, and we would all do well to hear it: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me." And God *will* grant it to you for Jesus' sake. Amen.

And now that peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in that one true faith in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.