

Misericordias Domini (2nd Sunday after Easter)

April 10, 2016

John 10:11-16

Jesus is the Good Shepherd

Pastor James Preus

Trinity Lutheran Church

There were two six year old boys, Billy and Bobby. One day Bobby brought to the playground a great big toy fire truck with real rubber tires and a realistic siren. “My dad gave it to me!” chirped Bobby. “My dad said it was too expensive,” thought Billy silently to himself as he coveted the shiny red truck. Another day Bobby showed Billy a brand new Swiss Army Pocket Knife. “My dad gave it to me!” said Bobby. “I asked my dad for one, but he said no,” responded Billy gloomily. “My dad let me play with firecrackers!” bragged Bobby. “My dad let me eat icecream and stay up late watching movies.” With every new detail Billy learned about Bobby’s dad, he became more jealous. I wish my dad were fun like Bobby’s. I wish he loved me like Bobby’s dad loves him. Little does Billy know that, while Bobby’s dad is fun, he’s rarely around. He shows up for a few hours, maybe days, gives Billy lots of attention, calls him buddy, calls him champ, but then he’s off again. Bobby’s dad doesn’t love his mother. He leaves at every sign of trouble. When the landlord comes with an eviction notice, Bobby’s dad is already gone. For the most part, Bobby’s dad is an absent father. He is a bad father.

While he didn’t think his dad was fun compared to Bobby’s dad, Billy’s father never abandoned him. He loves his mother and is faithful to her. He leads the family in prayers every night, teaches Billy to speak respectfully to his mother, helps him with his homework, and brings the family to church each week. Billy’s dad is completely devoted to his family. Billy’s dad is a good father.

Jesus is the *Good* Shepherd. But what does it mean that he’s good? Is he a fun guy like Bobby’s old man? Is he the guy you want to have a drink with? Is he really good at filling the pews? Jesus is the Good Shepherd, because he lays down his life for the sheep. A hireling runs away at any sign of trouble, just like Bobby’s dad. But as Billy’s dad is completely devoted to his family, Christ Jesus devotes even his life on the cross for his sheep.

That is how you identify the Good Shepherd. He is the crucified Christ. He is the one who does not run away, even under persecution and death. The Good Shepherd doesn't abuse the sheep. He doesn't take advantage of them. Not only does he show them affection (something anyone can do in good times), he fends off wolves and thieves when they attack. And the Good Shepherd does what no shepherd on earth would ever do. When the sheep go astray, this Good Shepherd *dies* for them.

We know who the Good Shepherd is. He's Jesus Christ. He died on the cross for the sins of the whole world, so that he could gather to himself one flock and be their Shepherd forever. Yet, who are the sheep? What makes a person Christ's little lamb?

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." (John 10:27) Not only do Jesus' sheep hear his voice, they listen! *And* they can distinguish between *his* voice and the voice of an imposter. "A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." (John 10:5) Jesus' sheep will not follow the voice of a stranger. They go astray at times, as St. Peter notes from Isaiah 53: "All we like sheep have gone astray." Yet, when their Shepherd calls them, they repent and return to him who laid down his life for them. His sheep are accosted by false shepherds, hirelings, who seek the sheep as a way of profit, and are even attacked by wolves who desire to eat their flesh, but their Good Shepherd protects them from them all.

There are many others who call to the sheep. They entice them with greener pastures, peaceful waters, a greater flock. But Christ's sheep don't follow such empty promises. Christ's sheep listen to *him* who laid down his life for them. For this reason, pastors and congregations err when they come up with other ways to attract people to their flock outside of Jesus' Word. Jesus' sheep hear *his* voice. They follow *him*. They will gather where the voice of their shepherd calls them, the voice of him who laid down his life for them. Gimmicks don't work. Only Christ's Word works. Jesus plainly says that they hear his voice and follow him. So if a congregation wants to gather Christ's little lambs together, it can do no more than proclaim the Words of him who laid down his life for the sheep.

Sometimes the Good Shepherd speaks hard words. Sometimes his message rubs abrasively against the conscience. The Good Shepherd leads his flock on a path not taken by the vast majority of

other flocks, which exposes his sheep to ridicule and hatred from those outside the flock. And when his sheep go astray, the Good Shepherd calls them to repentance. This can be unpleasant when all you want to do is live your life in private and freedom. But Christ's sheep listen to his voice and follow him, because he gives them eternal life. Other paths lead to death. Freedom from his flock is not freedom at all, but bondage to sin and death. Christ's sheep listen to *him*, because he gives them eternal life. Congregations that would silence Christ or limit his message, so to sound more appealing to people do not do Christ's work. The only way a Christian congregation can be blessed is by preaching and hearing Christ's Word, all of it. When Christ's sheep hear a message contrary to their Shepherd's message, they flee from that strange voice.

It is important to understand the benefits of listening to Christ's voice. Jesus says, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:28) No one else can do this. Jesus shows he loves his sheep more than anyone else possibly could by giving his life over to death for them. Yet, Christ didn't die simply to demonstrate his great love. Christ died, so that he could give eternal life to his sheep. He died to save them. Jesus died to save *you*. It is important to listen to Jesus' voice and not follow the message of an imposter, because only Jesus' message gives eternal life. Acceptance by people doesn't give eternal life. Doing good works doesn't give eternal life. Only Christ's death for you wins you eternal life. Because Jesus died for your transgressions. He takes your death away. And as your resurrected Shepherd, he stands uniquely able to shepherd you into eternal life. For this reason, you must flee from imposters, strangers who give a different gospel than Christ. Those who would teach you to rely on your works instead of Christ's death for you, must be fled from. Those who would lead you on a different path, a path that denies your sinful nature, that calls good what God says is evil, those false shepherds must be marked and avoided. No matter how nice they seem. No matter how tempting their message is, if it is contrary to the voice of your Good Shepherd, Christ says, "run."

Depending on where you live and what church you go to, there are numerous names for the Christian clergy. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox often refer to their priests as Father. Some refer to the man of God as minister, reverend, or preacher. Likewise, Scripture uses the titles Bishop, which

means overseer and Presbyter, which means elder. The moniker, “pastor” is especially nice. The word pastor means shepherd. Every man in the Office of the Ministry is an undershepherd to Christ, the head Shepherd. St. Peter writes to pastors:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

An undershepherd is not greater than the chief Shepherd. A pastor can only speak and do as his head Shepherd tells him, otherwise it would not be Jesus’ voice the sheep hear, but an ordinary man’s. Members of a congregation must know that the words of their pastor are the words of the Overseer and Shepherd of their souls; the one, who bore their sins in his body when they strayed. This is important, so the hearers can know that they have eternal life, that they are gathered in Christ’s true flock, and that they have the one true Shepherd. This can only be known through Christ’s promise of eternal life through his death and resurrection.

A shepherd is charged to do more than talk. He shepherds. He feeds the sheep. Leads them to drinkable water. Protects them from enemies. So a pastor must feed Christ’s sheep, as Jesus commanded Peter three times after his resurrection, “Feed my sheep.” This means a pastor should faithfully preach the Gospel, that Christ wins free salvation through his death. He should teach and exhort Christ’s sheep to receive the Sacrament in repentance and faith. And he should defend them from false shepherds, who would scatter the sheep, lead them astray, and kill them. He does this by preaching the truth about Christ, so that the sheep can learn to distinguish between the voice of their true Shepherd, the one who lays down his life for them and gives them eternal life, and the voice of an imposter. As St. Paul teaches Titus, “An Overseer must hold firm the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able give instruction in sound

doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9) When the pastor preaches the truth, the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard.

Christ’s voice is the sweetest sound to the ear of the Christian. As sheep will only come when their shepherd calls, so Christians must learn to recognize the voice of their Shepherd. While other voices sound tempting, only Christ’s voice forgives your sins. He is your Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for you, even as you were going astray. He called you by name in your baptism and continues to call you every day, to repent of your sins and to believe in his free forgiveness. His voice is sweet, because it erases your guilt and gives you eternal life. There is no voice like that of our Shepherd.

May the voice of our Good Shepherd ring in your ears and be cherished in your heart until that day Christ gathers us together as one flock. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.