

April 25, 2021

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI

St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

Text: John 10:11-18

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

He is Risen!

This day in the Church Year, the Fourth Sunday of Easter, is called Good Shepherd Sunday. The Gospel reading appointed for this day is from John chapter 10, which we just read. The Psalm is Psalm 23, which we also just prayed together. The other readings, the propers and the hymns, all highlight this one important point, so critical to understanding the Christian faith: Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd and – just as importantly – you are not. Nor am I, nor is any other pastor, minister, preacher, spiritual consultant, mystical guru or best-selling author. Jesus is the only one.

That seems rather obvious, doesn't it? But if it is so obvious, why do so many people think that the core function of the Christian church is all about producing better sheep? This is not a sheep improvement seminar. Christian worship is not about progressing to the point when you achieve a higher and higher levels of sheep-hood, until you graduate from the flock and become your own shepherd. And yet, that is how many people view the Christian faith. Ask a random person in town if they are a Christian and you will probably get a qualified "yes". Yes, I am a Christian because I am a nice person, because I was confirmed at such-and-such church decades ago, because I give to charity on occasion, or because I vote for the right political party and I make it a point never to murder people. But then ask them if they go to church, if they gather with the saints as Christ calls us to do, and they will more than likely say "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. I worship God in my own way." They think they have graduated from church, have progressed from being a sheep of God's flock. In their minds, they are a flock of one and they do not need a shepherd, not even the Good Shepherd. I can take care of myself, they think, even seeing to my own salvation.

Today is not Good Sheep Sunday. It is not about you, just like every other Sunday in the Church Year is not about you. They are all about Jesus. They are about His work, His sacrifice, His love for us. The Sundays are all dedicated to Jesus, but there is a day in the Church year dedicated to you: It is called Ash Wednesday. That day is about recognizing our sin and humbling ourselves before the Triune God, throwing ourselves on His mercy. But Sunday is never about you. Sunday is always about Him.

Our Gospel reading today is part of a longer discourse and comes after Jesus describes Himself as the door, the only door, into the sheep pen. He is the only way to the Father, the only way to enter into true communion with the Creator of the universe. There are others who claim this, both in other religions and within Christianity itself, but they

are wrong. The Pope claims that he is the only door, that you must submit to him and his authority in order to be a member of Jesus' flock. In effect, he claims to be the screen door you have to go through in order to get to the real door. There are also many cults and new age religions in which a mystic leader claims to have the key to understanding God, something given to them but denied to everyone else. But there is only one door and there is only one Good Shepherd. Thieves and robbers try to enter in by other means, but they are deceivers. Hired hands claim they are looking out for God's flock but do not love the flock as Jesus does. There is only one who knows the Father and does the Father's will. There is no one else born of men who compares to Jesus, for only He is one with the Father and the Spirit, only He was present from all eternity, only He humbled Himself by taking up our flesh only to lay down His life for us. His role is unique. To say that Jesus was only a wise teacher, only a good man, only a one enlightened mystic among many, is to call Him a liar, to call the Father and the Holy Spirit liars. And I don't know about you, but where I come from it is downright rude to call someone a liar. Especially when that someone is God.

Jesus' role as the Good Shepherd was to call out of Israel those in whom true faith blossomed. He gathered them to Himself, both during His early ministry and then in the days after His resurrection, the 40 days that we celebrate now as Eastertide. After His ascension, the apostles carried on His charge of preaching in Jerusalem. Through the working of the Holy Spirit they preached powerfully, as did Peter on the day of Pentecost, and thousands more were added to the flock of Jesus. But that was not all. As our Lord said, **"I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to My voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."** (v.16) There are not two true religions, Judaism and Christianity, there is only one. These other sheep our Lord was referring to are us, the Gentiles, who would not only join the flock of Israel but would come to dominate it. Believers in the Triune God have been gathered for millennia into one flock, one Church. We are all members of that flock because we know the Shepherd's voice. He called us. He rescued us. He did the hard work and we gain the benefit of His love. That is how God is known to us, not through mere words but through actions. The Good Shepherd gave up His life for us.

In the Epistle for today, St. John wrote: **"By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us"** (1 Jn 3:16). That is how we know our worth before Almighty God. Because He sent His Son to lay down His life for us, even while we were still sinners, even while we were still His enemies, hating Him and betraying Him at the drop of a hat. He did not lay down His life to reward us. He did it because He loves us warts and all and wanted to bring us back to Him. No matter how many times you wander off, He will come looking for you. No matter how stubborn or foolish you are, He wants you back. The Good Shepherd searches for each and every member of His flock and He brings them back, where He guards and protects them, nourishes them and watches them grow. It is a one-sided relationship, marked by truly gracious gifts, which we do not deserve and can never repay. But that makes sense... since when did sheep ever help the shepherd do anything?

Now, if God thinks enough of you to save you from death and the devil, is He just going to let you waste away in the sheep pen? Of course not. Besides protecting the sheep from wolves and thieves, the shepherd is also charged with feeding the sheep. And that is what He does here, in His sheepfold, Sunday after Sunday. He feeds you with His Word and He feeds you with His Sacrament. This is where the solo-Christian really misses out. God comes here, to this humble building, transforming it into a truly sacred place, and He does it just to be with you. He comes to give you life-sustaining gifts, life-altering gifts. The same Word that He used to create the universe He also uses to create and sustain faith in us. The same Word that Jesus spoke to many, "Your sins are forgiven", He also speaks to you here. He gives You the Gospel in tangible form, His holy Body and Blood to strengthen you in His blessed, mystical meal. The Good Shepherd is not absent. He is not a mere historical figure, like George Washington, that we look at in a painting. He is your Good Shepherd today and every day of your life.

In his letter to the church, John tells us what it is that makes these sheep different. It's not what they did to get into the sheep pen. It is how the washing of the Holy Spirit and the steady diet of Word and Sacrament changed them from rebellious beasts into God's flock. He wrote, "**we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as He has commanded us. Whoever keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in them.**" (1 Jn 3:23-34) Abide means "remain with" or "live with" and that is what we do. We live with God, each and every day, in communion with Him and with each other. The Good Shepherd isn't on vacation. He is still doing what He promised to do: Calling us by name and providing for us so that we will remain with Him for all eternity.

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In Jesus holy name, Amen.

Rev. Schopp