

John 10:11-16 (Misericordias Domini)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
May 1, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This past week was a special week in our church body, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. I don't just mean because of the 175th anniversary, which we discussed a bit and thanked God for last Sunday, and which we'll be celebrating all this upcoming year. This past week was a special week in our church body because it was "call day" at both our seminaries, in St. Louis and Fort Wayne. Candidates for the ministry both young and old just learned where the church is sending them on vicarage, or where God through the church is calling them to serve as pastors. Four short years ago I learned I would be staying in Germany to spend my vicarage year in Kaiserslautern. And one year ago we learned we would be returning to Kaiserslautern—that the LORD was calling me through the church and through this congregation to serve as pastor of this little flock. For 175 years our church has been training pastors, and every April we get to see the fruit of that process.

The word "pastor," is Latin for "shepherd." In the Old Testament the leaders of the people were literally shepherds of sheep: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Amos; the Old Testament is filled with shepherds. The ancestors of the Israelites were nomadic and their tradition of herding sheep continued even after they settled in the promised land. The Old Testament also refers to the religious leaders of the people as shepherds, as pastors of God's flock. Ezekiel prophesies against these pastors: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel." There we see a negative example of what shepherds look like when they abandon their flocks, when shepherds feed themselves instead of the sheep!

The New Testament continues using the language of shepherding to describe the ministers of the New Covenant. Two passages are read at every ordination. In John 21 Jesus asks Peter three times: “Do you love me,” and responds three times with: “feed my lambs,” “tend my sheep,” “feed my sheep.” This Galilean fisherman was turned into a shepherd, a pastor, as were the other apostles, like Philip and James, who we commemorate on May 1. This same Peter later instructs pastors around the world to: “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 5:2-4).

The called ministers of Christ are shepherds, they are pastors of God’s flock, tending the sheep, leading them in the pasture of God’s Word, guiding them to the streams of living water, and at times fighting off the wolves. But the strength and promise of the Office of the Ministry only comes in serving under the chief pastor, the Good Shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ. The true work of pastors is ultimately the work of Christ. The pastor is the means, the unworthy means, by which the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, preaches the Word and administers the Sacraments to His flock. Unworthiness leads many pastors, including this one, to pray Luther’s sacristy prayer every Sunday: “O Lord God, dear Father in heaven, I am indeed unworthy of the office and ministry in which I am to make known Your glory and to nurture and to serve this congregation. But since You have appointed me to be a shepherd and teacher, and the people are in need of the teaching and the instruction, be my helper and let Your holy angels attend to me. Then if You are pleased to accomplish anything through me, to Your glory and not to mine or to the praise of men, grant me, out of Your pure grace and mercy, a right understanding of Your Word and that I may also diligently perform it. O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, shepherd and bishop

of our souls, send Your Holy Spirit that He may work with me to will and to do through Your divine strength according to Your good pleasure. Amen.” Apart from the chief shepherd, the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, the pastor can accomplish nothing. Our true Shepherd and pastor is Jesus Christ alone, the Good Shepherd, and we know this from what Jesus says and does.

Only the Good Shepherd would suffer death for His sheep. A hired hand wouldn't do it. A hired hand would see the wolf coming and fear for His own life, fleeing from the scene and letting the wolf have his way with the sheep. If the sheep don't belong to him then he's not that invested. Jesus is referring here specifically to the religious rulers of the people, the shepherds of Israel. They should have been shepherding God's flock under the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ, but instead they served themselves. The prophet Ezekiel accuses the false shepherds of Israel: “the weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, they strayed but you have not brought them back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you ruled them.” The shepherds fed themselves instead of the sheep! They neglected their duty of serving the sheep and instead served their bellies. A false shepherd cares more for himself than for the flock entrusted to him.

But the LORD also promised to rescue His sheep from the hands of lazy shepherds: “For thus says the LORD God: ‘Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out . . . I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and He shall feed them: He shall feed them and be their shepherd.’” The shepherd David from Bethlehem is a picture for us of the Good Shepherd from Bethlehem, our LORD Jesus Christ. The good shepherd will “seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak.”

Jesus says of Himself, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” Jesus, the good shepherd, the “pastor bonus,” is so dedicated to His flock that He would rather die than see any of them lost. Jesus, the good shepherd, leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and goes to seek out the one lost sheep until he finds it and brings that sheep to repentance (Luke 15). As Isaiah 53 prophesies: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way.” It’s not just one little lamb that has left the fold. All one hundred sheep escaped the pen and were wandering around in the wilderness, surrounded everywhere by danger to life and limb. All the sheep needed to be brought back to repentance. All the sheep need Jesus, the Good Shepherd to go find them because all are lost, because all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is also the sacrificial lamb: “the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” The Good Shepherd bears our grief and carries our sorrows. The Good Shepherd became a sheep; our LORD Jesus Christ became man, the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world. Our LORD was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth. Our LORD Jesus Christ, the chief shepherd, laid down His life for us, His sheep, when He died on the cross for our sins and for the sins of the entire world. The wolf, that is, the devil, came for the lambs, but took out the shepherd instead, but in the attack the wolf also received a mortal wound. Satan was crushed so that he can no longer accuse the sheep, wounding their consciences. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, so He laid down His life to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bringing back those who have strayed. The Good Shepherd is not a hired hand, so He does absolutely everything to protect His sheep, to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Today the Good Shepherd continues guiding His flock through the means He has established, through the Word and the Sacraments, through the Office of the Ministry, where the Good Shepherd works through undershepherds to feed the flock. During the seven weeks of this Easter season, we begin to turn our attention from the resurrection of Christ to how our risen LORD works in His church today, from His Ascension to the right hand of the Father until He comes again on the Last Day to separate the sheep from the goats. From His Ascension into Heaven and the sending of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, our risen LORD works on earth through means, through the Word of God and the Sacraments. That's how the Holy Spirit works faith in people all over the world, bringing home the sheep who have strayed. Our LORD continues working in the church through his representatives, the called ministers of the church, and through all His people, His little flock scattered throughout the world. Jesus, our Good Shepherd will continue working in this way until He finally gathers His entire flock together to bring us into that eternal sheepfold, the pastures of our heavenly Father. There we will stand with those who have washed their robes white in the blood of the lamb, who is Himself our shepherd, guiding us to springs of living waters and wiping away every tear from our eyes (Rev 7:17). In the name of Jesus, Amen.

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