

John 10:11-18

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

Christ is risen! For this fourth Sunday of Easter, we turn our attention to John's Gospel, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And 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. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one

takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”

As we continue our Easter journey, we turn back into John’s Gospel to events prior to the death and resurrection of our Lord. This text is one that we typically read in the summertime, on Good Shepherd Sunday. It is the Sunday wherein we remember the goodness and kindness that our Lord shows to us again and again.

And this is important because in this section of John’s Gospel, the Lord here is showing himself in distinction to the shepherds who are hired hands who don’t care about the sheep. And this is an important distinction to make. Even in the Lord’s day there were those who were more concerned with garnering and maintaining political power and favor than with rightly declaring the Word of the Lord. In the same way, there are many

hired hands in our own day who are more interested with the things of this world than with boldly proclaiming that Christ is risen to and for all people.

The problem is not that these other hired shepherds are lazy. It doesn't matter that they are interested in making sure that they get theirs. The untrustworthy nature of these hired hands isn't the issue. The problem is that when they see the wolf coming, they jump out of the way. They are willing to watch the sheep get slaughtered rather than step in to defend the sheep, even if that should mean their own deaths.

St. Paul picks up on this idea when he says, "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Indeed, this is the part that Jesus

leaves out of this teaching for today. Are the sheep actually worth the shepherd putting his life on the line for?

If we are honest, the answer is no. These sheep are stubborn. They are willful and they intentionally disobey the shepherd's voice again and again and again. Even the shepherd that actually owns them can't keep these sheep in line. They eagerly wander away into other pastures that they think will be better, only to become lost and despondent when they realize how wrong they were. They're out there eating all kinds of things they shouldn't be eating, putting things into their bodies that are bad. They are mistreating each other all the time, constantly attacking one another, sometimes individually and sometimes in groups. They are awful sheep. The wool is all damaged from too much hair dye. The meat is all tough and gamey, polluted by the terrible things they ate. When the hired shepherd sees the wolf coming, he thinks that he isn't getting

paid enough to risk his life for near worthless sheep. He'll let the wolf in and soon enough the wolf will be filled and then the rest of the sheep will be safe once again. All, that is, except for the sheep that is lost. It's the easiest way to deal with this enemy that is dangerous to not just the sheep, but to the hired shepherd as well.

But that's the way of things, isn't it? We can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs, right? We can't stop evil without some collateral damage. In all things there must be acceptable losses. I recently read an article written by a pastor who came in and changed the congregation that he had been called to serve by making a series of unnecessary and non-Lutheran changes, and he was unconcerned that people were driven away because of his actions. They went to other churches, so it was fine. Acceptable losses to the flock. That is absolutely the wisdom of man. We need to examine to make

sure that the rewards are greater than the potential risks. And for the hired shepherd, the reward of saving all of the sheep is just not worth the risk to his own life and livelihood. After all, a lot of these sheep are going to die anyway, so may as well get the most you can out of them before they're gone.

But not our shepherd. Our shepherd is the good shepherd. Our shepherd is the risen shepherd. He does the right thing. He cares for all the sheep that have been given to him. Jesus reflects on this in his prayer to the Father when he was in the garden agonizing over his impending death when he said, "Of those whom you gave me, I have lost not one." That's a good shepherd indeed who doesn't lose any of his sheep.

Indeed, the good shepherd doesn't hand over any sheep to the wolf. He doesn't see any of the sheep as worthless or a waste. Rather, our shepherd handed himself over. By his very blood shed for you and for me at the cross, the sheep are

protected. Our Lord Jesus Christ has crushed the wolf under his pierced feet. Our shepherd has defeated the wolf once and for all. The wolf's teeth have been pulled out of his head. He is no danger to us as long as we stay safe in the shepherd's fold. Our shepherd died, but Christ is risen!

You see, Jesus is so powerfully protective of us because of what he paid for us. He bought us all with his own blood. His agonizing death on the cross was the payment in full for you, me, and all Christians throughout time. And because we have been bought for such a high price, our shepherd does everything he can to protect us. He washes us clean in the waters of Baptism. He feeds us with his own body and blood because we live in a land that is devoid of any other source of true, good, nourishment. He strengthens us with his Word that he lovingly speaks to us again and again and again.

Yes, our shepherd bought us with his life, but he is the shepherd who lays down his life and takes it up again. We know that Christ is risen! He has defeated death itself and doesn't leave us alone to face that particular wolf on our own. He is the one who is victorious over all the forces of sin, death, and the devil. He is alive and so he shepherds his flock even now. He continues to care for us, leading and guiding his Church on earth through the ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

Yes, we have one good shepherd. Our good shepherd continues to call into his service other shepherds as needed. Some are of course better than others and some are more faithful than others. But our faith is not and should never be in our pastors. I am but a man. I will undoubtedly let you down at some time or another. Just as any pastor can and will. I am not the good shepherd. I did not bleed for you. I did not die for you. The most I can hope and strive for is to be an ok shepherd who

faithfully points the sheep to look to the good shepherd. I point to the good shepherd and I shout with joy that Christ is risen! For I myself must look to the good shepherd to be strengthened and encouraged for the work that he has given to me and to receive the same salvation that is yours in Christ Jesus.

Yes, we have the good shepherd. We have the shepherd who defends his sheep with his very life and who cares for us in a way that no other shepherd ever could or would. We have a shepherd who has forgiven our sins by shedding his own blood to pay the penalty of our sin and to purchase us from the kingdom of darkness. Our good shepherd leads us to lie down in green pastures and nourishes our souls. Our good shepherd died, but Christ is risen! Amen.

Now, may the peace that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord to life everlasting.

Amen.