

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

One of the favorite word pictures that Christians have of our relationship with Jesus is the one found in Psalm 23 – The Lord is my Shepherd, Our Good Shepherd. As the Lord is our Shepherd, his followers are his sheep. Us. We follow our Good Shepherd as he leads us to green pastures and beside quiet waters. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil...for our Good Shepherd is with us; his rod and his staff, they bring us comfort. I still carry in my wallet a small picture of Jesus carrying a small lamb leading a flock of sheep.

Jesus draws on this image of sheep and shepherd while preaching around Jerusalem. I think this relationship that Jesus describes between the sheep and the shepherd can be helpful for us today—specifically as a new pastor preaching his first sermon to his congregation. I hope that this text can help us understand the relationship Jesus describes between a shepherd and his sheep and how that applies to our relationship—me a called shepherd of you, God's flock.

This isn't new...in the book of Acts, Paul encouraged the church leaders in Acts to: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28)." Peter also told pastors in his first letter to "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care...(1 Peter 5:2)."

Jesus describes this relationship between the Shepherd and his sheep like this: The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice (John 10:2-4).

The shepherd goes about his life the right way—he enters through the gate. For me, my gate to you, my flock, is through Jesus Christ. It is through him and by his grace that I serve and lead you. We are all in this together because of our own relationship with the Good Shepherd—Jesus Christ—through our baptisms.

This passage also talks about how the sheep listen to their shepherd's voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And the sheep follow him because they know their shepherd's voice. My first priority as your shepherd is to get to know you and to allow you to get to know me and my family. To accomplish this task, throughout this spring and summer, I want to meet with every household at Trinity. Starting in a couple of weeks, I will be setting out a sign-up for households to sign up for a time to meet with me. There will be times available to meet with my family at the parsonage, to meet here at church in the conference room, or I would like to visit you in your homes. Having this time will give me an opportunity to figure out who's who, and to put names with faces. By Christmas, I hope to be able to call 90% of the congregation by name. During this time of learning and getting to know each other, I always appreciate reminders of what your name is as well as patience when I should know your name, but I don't quite yet. I will.

This getting to know each other is important because our Christian faith is expressed in our relationships, in our love shown to each other. In order for me to effectively lead you, you've gotta to know that I know who you are and that I care for you. As Jesus said, the sheep follow their shepherd because they know (and I would add *trust*) their shepherd's voice. That's the first thing – The shepherd and sheep know each other, they have a trusting relationship.

Jesus also talks about how shepherds react when a wolf approaches the flock. When the hired hand who is just doing a job sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. The wolf attacks the flock and scatters it (John 10:12). But the good shepherd is willing to fight to protect his flock—even to the point of losing his life.

One of the tools the shepherd has is a staff—the long piece of wood with a curve at the end. The staff can be used to keep the sheep in line and to protect the sheep from the wolf. For me as your shepherd, my chief tool, my staff is God's Word. Part of God's Word, the Law, is used to guide you in paths of righteousness. I may use God's Law as a mirror, to show us our sin, to remind us that we need a Savior. God's Law can also be used as a guide, a blueprint for how God wants us to live as a flock redeemed by Jesus Christ. Another use is that God's Law can be used to drive away sin.

The wolves in this parable are like sins that pull us away from the Lord. Sometimes the wolves appear in sheep's clothing to entice us away from God's flock. The wolf of sin and selfish desires draws us away until we are far away from the other sheep and then the wolf of sin shows its true colors as it drinks the life out of our soul. That's what sin does—it separates us from God and drains our spiritual life. Just think about how addictive sins destroy the person—addictions of illegal substances, alcoholism, gambling, pornography—they pull us away from God and our faith. But sometimes it's those sins, those wolves, that approach us in sheep's clothing—we say to ourselves, doing this isn't that bad. Sins of gossip, sins when we hold a grudge and refuse to forgive, sins when we cheat or tell white lies, sins when we fantasize or lust after other people or things of this world. These sins don't seem too bad on the surface, but underneath is a wolf that seeks to devour you and drag you away from the Lord.

As your shepherd, I hate sin. I hate the damage sins causes in our lives. I hate how the sin we allow into our lives leads to broken marriage and damaged relationships, how individual sins and selfishness leads to hurt feelings and bitter hearts, I hate seeing and hearing the stories of souls shattered because by sin that was done to them. I hate sin and it's consequences and I will fight hard to declare God's Word that can protect you, the members of this flock.

And so, as your shepherd, one of my jobs is use the staff of God's Word to drive off the wolves of sin and also to protect you with God's Word. Sometimes this may happen in sermons, in Bible Studies, in private conversations, in counseling—I will seek to encourage you to stay on God's path of right living. And when I become aware of sin, I will seek to drive out that sin—not judging you, not condemning you. Chief of sinners though I be—I'm not anyone who can judge, that's God's job alone—but I will point out sin with the desire and purpose to lead you back to the Lord.

And the Good News is that God's Word has another side—the Gospel. That when sin is exposed, the Lord wants us to repent of our sin—that is to turn 180 degrees, to turn away from our sin and turn toward the Lord—and God promises to forgive us. In every worship service, we participate in a corporate confession and it is my privilege to not only remind you of God's mercy, but to forgive you your sins in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ. As your shepherd, I also bring you to the powerful waters of Baptism where God works new life through the water and the Word. As your shepherd, I will prepare for you the meal of forgiveness—The Lord's Supper—where God promises to strengthen your faith and He forgives your sin.

One pastor that I really look up to, when asked, "What is being a pastor all about?" He said, "Just love 'em." Just love the people of your flock. And that's what I will seek to do—to love you to life in our Lord Jesus Christ whom I serve.

And it was Jesus, our Good Shepherd, who was sent to earth to show us God's great love for you and for me. Jesus walked this planet eating and drinking, performing miracles, healing people and driving out demons. Jesus walked into the garden on the Mount of Olives where he was betrayed. Jesus was mocked and spit upon, beaten and bruised, and he carried his own cross to Mount Golgotha. And there he stretched out his arms, and said, "I love you this much. It is finished." And he breathed his last.

On the cross, Jesus paid the price in God's eyes for our sins. In Jesus' resurrection, Jesus shows us that there is always hope. No matter how bad or how big the sin, Jesus offers us forgiveness. No matter how shattered our lives are, Jesus brings us healing. No matter how dark the circumstances, Jesus gives us light. For Jesus Christ has overcome the world and for all who believe in him, we too, are victors in the battle over sin, death, and the devil. As your shepherd, I will remind you of the victory we have through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—there is always hope!

There is one last thing that I want to point out about the relationship between the shepherd and his sheep. Why did the shepherd watch over and protect the sheep? Because every spring, the sheep would give up its year's growth of wool. The sheep provided a livelihood for the shepherd. This analogy breaks down when you think about Jesus—he doesn't need anything from us. We need everything from him! But in our setting, as pastor and congregation, shepherd and sheep, we are stronger when we pool our resources together, when you give up yours. You all provide for the livelihood of me and my family, of our teachers' and staff's families. We depend upon you to give. It's a part of our relationship. There will be times when I will ask you to give of your time, give of your talents, and to give of your financial resources. Our church and school are stronger when everyone chips in.

And from what I've seen already, there are so many good things already happening around here and so many people who give of themselves in so many ways. Trinity Lutheran Church and School is an exciting place to be. And I am looking forward to being your shepherd and guiding and leading by the grace given me through Jesus Christ, my Lord. Amen.

And now may the peace of God that passes all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.