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St. John's Lutheran Church of Burlington
21 April 2024

Sermon on John 10:11-18

Worship Theme:

THE RISEN SAVIOR PROVIDES GOOD SHEPHERDING

Scripture frequently pictures spiritual care in terms of a shepherd watching over sheep. For sheep to survive they need a shepherd who will lead them to food and defend them from enemies. Many false prophets claim they can provide healing for your soul, but they distort the truth. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is faithful. He raises up true sub-shepherds who know Christ and proclaim the truth of his Gospel.

Sermon Theme: **“The Most-Qualified Good Shepherd”**

1. Perfect Control of His Life
2. Perfect Care for Our Lives

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

If you were to hire a shepherd to care for a flock of sheep, what would you look for? What would you list as “must haves” in order for someone to be a successful and qualified shepherd? The most obvious and boiled-down answer to that question is, “the shepherd must be able to provide for all the needs of the sheep.” And really there’s two parts to that: first, what the shepherd is like; second, what the needs of the sheep are.

We understand pretty easily that, in the biblical image of shepherd and sheep, we are the sheep. This includes pastors, teachers, parents, children – we are all sheep. While some disagree on whether sheep are intelligent or dumb, everyone would agree there are needs which sheep cannot provide for themselves. They may be able to find food and shelter, but if sheep are threatened, they can do very little to protect themselves. And you’ve probably seen the pictures and heard the stories of sheep that have been lost for years and have come back with insane amounts of wool because they haven’t been properly groomed and sheared. Sheep may be able to provide some things for themselves, but every sheep has needs it can’t handle. Every sheep needs a shepherd to protect it and provide for it.

We easily see that similarity between us and sheep – we are able to provide some things for ourselves in life, but we will never be able to provide everything. Another source must also provide for us, and it’s very important for that provider to be the right one. We want one who knows our needs and can properly supply them. It’s safe to assume that everyone wants the best of everything – after all, who would ever choose a 1-star hospital over a 5-start hospital? If we have needs that need to be met, we want the **most-qualified** person to provide them for us.

Of course, we no sooner say that than we also must admit our lives don’t often reflect it, especially in our search for spiritual care. In our hearts we know that Jesus is the **most-qualified Shepherd** there is, yet we daily wander away from

him, looking for literally anyone else to volunteer as our shepherd. We seek people who are sinners just like us and elevate them to the number one position of honor in our lives, a position they absolutely do not deserve. Whether it's religious leaders, politicians, celebrities, pro athletes, famous Youtubers and TikTokers, or family and friends, if we look to those people as the number-one provider and protector in our lives, we're going to be let down every single time. And it doesn't matter if they have known us our entire lives or if they wouldn't know us if they fell over us twice, because in the end they're all going to fail at something. No matter how good the intentions might be, there is always a limit to their ability and authority; there will always be something they simply cannot deliver or provide.

That becomes even clearer when we see the qualifications God sets for the one who shepherds his people. There are requirements no human being can ever meet. In John 10, Jesus explains what it means to be the Shepherd of God's people, and he says the Shepherd should *know his sheep and his sheep know him*. That one doesn't seem too challenging, but then he continues: The Shepherd must also know all the *sheep that aren't in the sheep-pen yet, lay down his life for the sheep, and take his life back up again! And these aren't optional!* Jesus said, "*This command I received from my Father.*" According to God, **the most-qualified Shepherd** must have **perfect control of his life**. He must have absolute authority, being both willing and able to lay his life down in service to the sheep AND having so much power and authority that even after dying he still has complete control over death. There will NEVER be a politician, athlete, or TikToker who can do THAT! Which means none of them will ever be qualified to be our shepherd.

But Jesus can do all this, and in fact, he already has – we've been talking about it for weeks! Jesus came to this world to live among the sheep because we were in serious danger. Not only were we not looking for the right shepherd – we were willingly following the wolf! Jesus warns, "*The wolf comes, attacks the flock, and scatters it.*" But we sinners saw the wolf coming, weren't afraid, and even listened to and followed him because what he offered sounded better to us than staying safely in the sheep-pen with a real shepherd. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out where the wolf might choose to lead these sheep though. He might promise to bring the sheep to green pastures and clear waters, but the only destination those sheep will actually reach is the wolf's den. And once the wolf has them inside his den, it's not too hard to guess what comes next.

So that's exactly why Jesus came: to save the sheep from the wolf. We thought we knew what we were doing and we thought we were going to a place where we would be treated well, but the reality is what the Prophet Isaiah said in chapter 53: *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way*. If left to our own devices, we will never end up where we should be and will never be safe on our own. We turn to our own ways and we follow whatever glitters and sparkles and grabs our attention the most. In the end, we're lost and afraid, staring at the menacing grin of the wolf, trapped in a den we willingly entered, hopeless and helpless *like sheep without a shepherd*. [Matt. 9:36]

That would be, could be, and (honestly) should be our eternal fate. We ran

away from the only Shepherd who actually has the authority and ability to provide a perfect eternal paradise – we sinned and disobeyed and did what we thought was better, and God does not have to forgive us. He is well within his rights as God to tell us, “I made you to be something better, but you chose your own path so now you’re on your own. Good luck! Enjoy hell!” But instead, contrary to everything we would expect, Psalm 103 says, “*He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*”

No one except the Shepherd would ever put so much on the line just for disobedient sheep. Hired hands wouldn’t care. Wolves would eagerly attack. And we would be powerless to change or stop either of those things. So in the middle of our struggle, Jesus speaks one of the simplest yet most powerful sentences in the entire Bible: “*I am the Good Shepherd.*” Every single one of those words is life-changing for us:

- “I” – This is Jesus himself – Immanuel, God-in-the-flesh the Savior of the world! – making these promises about who he is and what he does for us.
- “am” – This is one of Jesus’ many “I am” statements, which both take us back to the “I AM” God revealed in the Old Testament and remind us that this is not something only about the past or the future; rather, this is a constant truth, right here, right now, and always!
- “the” – If Jesus were “A” shepherd, then we could rightly assume there are more and that he is just one of many. But he is clearly described as THE Shepherd, the one and only of this kind.
- “Good” – Jesus is not a so-so Shepherd who takes care of the sheep when and if he feels like it. No, he is good – perfect even! (remember when God finished creating the perfect sinless world, he also described that as “good!”) – and Jesus never fails to accomplish the mission given to him by his Father.
- “Shepherd” – There are sheep that need to be cared for, and Jesus specializes in exactly that. He cares for his sheep in every way, both physical needs and spiritual needs, always perfectly protecting and providing.

That means every single day, Jesus fulfills his role as *the Good Shepherd*. He protects us from foes and dangers far beyond our ability to fight and provides for needs far beyond our ability to obtain. He defends us against the attacks of Satan and the demons and against countless temptations from the world around us and from our own sinful hearts. And he perfectly provides every need for us, yes physical earthly needs, but far more importantly spiritual eternal needs. He creates and strengthens our faith through his Word and the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. He keeps us closely connected to him and surrounds us with his undying mercy and love. He gives us little flocks to belong to while we live on earth (like St. John’s), and simultaneously keeps us focused on the one big flock to which we belong (The Christian Church) and the perfect eternal home we will enjoy in heaven. Jesus even knows the sheep who have not been found yet – *the sheep not of this sheep-pen!* He knows them and longs for them to be found and to join the sheep already enjoying his protection, provision, and love.

Understandably, we might say, “That’s an awful lot for one shepherd to do – how do we know for sure that Jesus really does all that?” The answer is simple: he is *the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, only to take it up again!* When the sheep were threatened and in danger, the Good Shepherd valued our lives so highly that he chose to give up his own life instead. And to prove his almighty authority, Jesus then commanded death to release him again – and death had no choice but to obey. There’s a reason we celebrate “Good Shepherd Sunday” as part of the Easter Season – our Good Shepherd is the Savior who Lives! He is the God who made us, loves us, and saves us, the God who knows absolutely everything about us and is perfectly committed to guarding and protecting us as he guides us safely on the path to our eternal home. He says:

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.¹⁶ I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.¹⁷ The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”

In his mercy and grace, God the Father knew the exact kind of shepherd we need to safely make it through this life to join him in eternity. So he gave us Jesus, **The Most-Qualified Good Shepherd**, the one with **Perfect Control of His Life** and **Perfect Care for Our Lives**. So for being our perfect eternal Good Shepherd, we thank you, Jesus. Amen!

And the peace of God which goes beyond all understanding will guard and keep our hearts and our minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.