

Sermon April 21, 2024 John 10:11-18

“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.”

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

Windy weather last week broke branches of trees. Gathering the sticks together into bundles keeps the yard tidy and ready for the mower to cut the grass. Gathering the fallen branches together is a picture of the Holy Spirit’s work of gathering Christians into the Church. By the preaching of the Gospel, He “calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith,” as the Small Catechism puts it. Together in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, we have a place to belong. He makes us strong. We know who we are. Under one Shepherd, there is one flock.

Once you have gathered sticks into a bundle, they are hard . . . almost impossible to break. Yet, the bundle can easily be broken – one stick at a time. Jesus is the one Shepherd who joins us together in one flock, the holy Christian Church. Like a hungry wolf, Satan tries to separate us from the Church, to isolate us . . . driving sheep and lambs out of the flock. Alone, the infernal wolf can easily destroy us.

The devil drools as he gazes at the dear Christians who hold fast to Christ in saving faith – like a wolf who wants to eat the sheep. Unlike the Good Shepherd who came to give abundant life to the sheep, the wolf wants the sheep to die. Satan works like a ravenous and sneaky wolf – snatching and scattering sheep.

He is also like a hired hand who doesn't own the sheep. Unlike the Good Shepherd who loves the sheep and lays His life down for the sheep, the hired hands run at the first sign of danger, abandoning the sheep. Satan works like the hired hand. He doesn't care about the sheep.

How does he do that? By spreading doubt and false teaching in the minds and hearts of the flock. Is the Bible really true? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Does faith in Christ alone apart from the good deeds we do really save us and bring us to heaven? With such deadly doubts, the satanic wolf wraps his claws around straying sheep. With false teachings, the ancient enemy sinks his fangs into helpless lambs. Apart from Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd, we are lost.

The Shepherd, however, seeks us, His lost sheep, from wherever we have strayed. Jesus loves us. He laid down His life to save us. The Shepherd forgives our sins. He binds up our wounds. He gathers us into one flock.

And since there is one Lord Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd, there is one flock gathered together under Him as our Head. Since there is only one Good Shepherd, He has only one Word for us and for all the world. Hear the Shepherd's voice proclaim this one unchanging, divine message – full and free forgiveness of all our sins earned by His death on the cross . . . unending, eternal life in Him. And by that word the Shepherd Jesus, who rose again from the dead and ascended to heaven, leads His sheep to dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Since Jesus is the one and only Good Shepherd, He gathers His sheep together under the sign of the cross . . . in the water and Word of Holy Baptism. There the straying sheep of our sinful nature is drowned. In Baptism, the Good Shepherd gathers the sheep and lambs of His flock and carries them home.

Since Jesus is the one and only Good Shepherd, the flock in fellowship with Him is fed by Him with His Supper. Under the bread, His body is truly present – the same body that hung on the cross, that rose again from the tomb, that was handled by Thomas . . . the same body that ate and drank with the disciples, that bodily ascended to heaven and now lives and reigns from the Father's right hand. Under the wine, His blood is truly present – the same blood that poured forth at the cross, that was shed for us as the full and final ransom to forgive our sins . . . the same blood that now intercedes for us before the Father's throne. Here, the Good

Shepherd feeds and cares for His sheep. In Jesus, we are one. For as there is one Shepherd, there is only one flock.

All of this was foretold long ago. The Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, pictured the unified kingdom, the holy Christian Church, that God would bring about through the Good Shepherd, Jesus. At that time, the chosen people lived under a divided kingdom and longed for unity. God told Ezekiel to take sticks—two sticks for this divided kingdom—one for Judah, one for Joseph. The Lord told Ezekiel, “Hold them in your hand to form one stick. Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am about to take the stick of Joseph... and the tribes associated with him. And I will join with it the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, that they may be one in My hand.” How can a fractured and divided people be brought together again and made into one? Only by the hand of the Lord . . . only in the nail-pierced, but living hand of the Lord, the great Shepherd of the sheep. “And I will make them one nation in the land... and one king shall be king over them all,” so the Lord goes on to say to Ezekiel. In Christ Jesus, there is oneness – one Shepherd; one flock.

The Lord is our Shepherd. With the rod and staff of His Law and His Gospel, He shepherds us, gathering us into His flock as one people. Jesus alone leads us safely through the valley of the shadow of death to the green pastures and still waters of eternal life. And following in faith the voice of Jesus Christ, the one Shepherd makes us and continues to make us one flock. Amen.

**The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him.
Amen.**

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