

June 18, 2017
Second Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 9:35—10:8

Dear flock of Grace Lutheran Church,

I found it ironic that the Gospel lesson for this Sunday I would be absented as your pastor was this section of Matthew where he writes of Jesus, *“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”* The title “pastor” simply means “shepherd” in Latin, so I guess at some very basic level today, you all could today refer to yourselves as shepherdless.

But we know Jesus Christ as our Good Shepherd. You have been baptized into Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. Matthew’s narrative is working its way toward declaring the truth of this shepherd and what He has done to secure His sheep. He beat His sheep’s enemies of sin, death and Satan by His cross, and He has risen from death in victory and claimed Lordship over all that is—especially His sheep.

So to sit in a church and think of yourself as shepherdless is really quite laughable. Pastors come and go. They have good days and bad days. Sometimes their words change lives, other times they cure insomnia. But the Good Shepherd always delivers the goods. He has made and keeps wonderful promises. *“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”* Matthew ends his Gospel on Christ’s promise, *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

You are baptized. We don’t say “we’re baptized.” We say “are baptized,” having the present and enduring condition of being one claimed by Christ in the washing of water and the Spirit. There God placed His name on us and His presence with us throughout our life is assured.

What we need for this life; He provides. We call to Him in prayer; He hears us. We sin and run to Him in repentance; He forgives and restores us. We die; He raises us to eternal life. He is a really good shepherd.

We need to remember this and take it to heart. Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Knowing this truth is imperative, because our sinful nature seeks something completely different—to be sheep without a shepherd.

Consider Adam and Eve in the garden. Was their temptation just a good-looking piece of fruit? No. The turning point came when the serpent said to Eve, *“You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil”* Basically, the serpent who is Satan was saying, “You don’t have to be a sheep. Turn away from the Good Shepherd and be a shepherd to yourself.”

This is basically what sin is; the choice we make to be our own shepherd rather than Christ’s sheep. Consider the way we rationalize our sins. The Word and will of God is quite clear in that we are to love God and love neighbor in the manner made clear in the Ten Commandments. But how quickly do we turn from His leading because it’s inconvenient to our plans, might cost us some time or treasure, might cause us to humble ourselves lower than we think appropriate? “Jesus points that way, but I’m going this way instead—there’s a new shepherd in town!”

While it is true we are all poor, miserable sinners plagued by this leaning toward disobedience, we cannot be comfortable with it. We must keep our eyes on Christ, remembering that it is only in Him we are brought safely before God. Apart from Christ we aren’t just sheep without a shepherd; we’re sheep opposed to the shepherd. Absent Jesus, we’re enemies of God

and subjects of His wrath. To turn from our Good Shepherd is to return to the death from which He has led us.

“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.”

If there is someplace in your life today where you know you are not following God’s leading, pray for Christ’s shepherding there. He has already paid the blood-price to forgive whatever the sin may be—His forgiveness is not in question. However, the question may be who you are going to allow to be shepherd there. Pray, “Jesus, lead me,” and follow Him.

With all due respect to Grace’s elders who are leading the service here, allowing yourself to be your own shepherd can be kind of like worship today.

In the worldly sense, today is real convenient. There’s less singing, less liturgy and the worship service is real short. Church today isn’t making all that big of a demand on your life. You’re going through the Christian motions and everything seems pretty good. You can go home and feel pretty good, right?

Then again, what’s missing? The Lord’s Supper. What’s really absent is the body and blood of Jesus, bringing you to your knees in repentance to receive salvation, the leading of your Good Shepherd—the assurance of reconciliation with God in the substance of Jesus Christ Himself conveying the forgiveness of sins.

Admittedly, that’s kind of harsh. There is Gospel and salvation proclaimed aplenty today. But the Lord’s Supper is a powerful work and leading of Jesus for His sheep, and I kind of hope y’all leave with a mourning of its absence. Sure, the service was shorter, but at what cost?

Jesus is not just your shepherd here at Grace. “I am with you always.” Are you getting comfortable absenting Him somewhere in your life? It may seem convenient in the world, but at what cost?

Don’t risk it. Don’t do it. Hear your Good Shepherd’s voice calling you to follow. Repent of the times, ways and places you’ve decided to shepherd yourself apart from Him. Recall the Holy Baptism by which He declares you to be His beloved sheep, and know that you are safe in His care.

Your pastor may go absent. Your church family may get busy and not always be there for you. But in Christ you have been reconciled to God and He is always there for you—loving you, forgiving you, and shepherding you through this fallen world to the green pastures of eternity. He gives this to you now in time through Word and Sacrament. Continue to follow your Good Shepherd all the way home.

Happily in my Shepherd’s care,

Pastor Rich