

15 May 2011
Easter 4 / Good Shepherd Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Our Merciful Shepherd”

Text: John 10:1-10 (Acts 2:42-47; 1 Peter 2:19-25)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

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

Today is the Sunday we call Good Shepherd Sunday. But for centuries, this Sunday was called by its Latin name: *Misericordias Domini*, which means, the Tender Mercies of the Lord. Those two names for this Sunday belong together - as we find them together in the 23rd Psalm; and they help us remember something very important: **that our Good Shepherd is all about mercy.**

So what is mercy? It's not easy to define or describe in just a few words. I sometimes use the definition that *mercy is not getting what we deserve*. Which is okay, but doesn't really say what mercy is, but what it's not. It's not justice. For justice is getting what we deserve. And justice we know; justice follows rules; justice can be defined and clearly laid out. And so mercy is related to justice, yet different from it.

Or, to bring this into theological categories: justice is of the Law, and mercy is of the Gospel.

The Law is specific. The Law tells us what should be done and what should not be done. The Law is about punishment, revenge, just desserts. It is measureable. But mercy is different. Mercy is forgiveness, repaying evil with good, loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us, turning the other cheek. It is not so specific, because anything of the Gospel is gift. It is not about measuring, but about giving. It is not about paying back in right and equal proportion, but freely giving what is not deserved. It is about receiving what *cannot* be paid back.

Mercy also is not natural to us; it is something that must be learned. As children, we quickly learn of Law and punishments, of consequences and justice. Children are often strict and exacting. Mercy takes more time. Law and justice is received; mercy is formed. Justice is easy, mercy is hard. Justice is demanded, mercy can only be begged.

Today, we hear of our Good Shepherd and we hear of His mercy; He is our Shepherd of mercy. For what He does for us is completely undeserved; what He gives to us is completely gift. For we are sinners; sinners who deserve nothing but punishment, nothing by condemnation. We are sheep who love to wander. And where do we wander? Where we should not be and do not belong. We look to pastures we believe are greener, but, in fact, are filled with death. Instead of remaining in the green pastures of the Word of God, we feast on the deadly wisdom of the world. Instead of remaining in the ways of Lord, we follow paths that seem to make more sense or seem more successful, but only lead to sadness and hunger. And whether it is in ignorance or rebellion, wandering is still wandering; it is still separation from the care of our Good Shepherd. And while we may wind up with our stomachs stuffed, our lusts satisfied, or our emotions temporarily happy, we are not better off, but lost, hurt, trapped, and in danger.

And so we prayed today: *Lord, have mercy*. Perhaps better to say: we begged for it. For us and for all people. Many times. For it is what we who have wandered yet again this week, truly need. And it is what our Saviour has come to give.

For yes, our Shepherd comes to us, and comes for us. He comes looking for us to mercy us, just as He always does. Just as He did with Adam and Eve, when they chose the pastures satan offered, but which brought death. They wandered, and they were afraid. They hid themselves, both from God and from each other. But God came looking for them; already, in the Garden, showing Himself our Good Shepherd. He came and called out to His frightened little lamb, **“where are you?”** (Genesis 3:9)

This is what He now does for you. Jesus told us today that **He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out**. Like Adam, He comes to find you and call you back. Not in condemnation, but with the forgiveness of your sins. The forgiveness He Himself would earn for you on the cross and provide for you in His Word and Sacraments. That the door to God and Paradise slammed shut by sin, be once again opened to you by Jesus. For as Jesus goes on to say, He Himself is the door that leads to eternal life. The door of mercy.

Peter talked about that mercy in his epistle this morning. That Jesus did not get what He deserved, so that we would not get what we deserved. Jesus deserved praise and honor as God, but instead **bore our sins in his body on the tree** - He got what we deserved: the death and condemnation of the cross. And He did so in mercy. So that we would not get what we deserved; that we would not die in sin but **die to sin, and live to righteousness**. That we might live His life, which is truly a gift that sheep who continually wander off do not in any way deserve.

And yet it is yours! From the cross, Jesus is calling out to you by name. To lead you

out of hiding, out of your shame, out of condemnation, with His *I forgive you*. I forgive you all your sins. For as Peter said: **by His wounds you have been healed**. And it is this healing that Jesus now gives to you. **For**, as Peter says, **you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls**. That is an interesting verse because the word "returned" there is actually in the passive voice - which means that our return is not something we have done at all, but was something done to us. We were not the active ones; someone else was. We didn't find our own way back; we were found and brought back. By our Good Shepherd. By our merciful Shepherd.

For most of us, that happened when we were baptized as infants, which is a wonderful picture of the love and mercy of our Good Shepherd. For in baptism, through His Word joined to the water, our Good Shepherd comes to us as helpless infants and scoops us up in His mercy, bringing the littlest and most vulnerable of His lambs back into His flock.

But it's not just infants. No matter how old you are, your Good Shepherd comes and calls for you. Calling you with His Word and scooping you up with His forgiveness. Like Adam, that's not our doing; that's not something we seek on our own, no matter how old or smart or sophisticated you are. Our sin shames and frightens us into hiding from others and from God. Hiding that can take all kinds of forms, from proud denial of our sin, to good-sounding excuses for our sin, to actual physical separation and hiding.

But God in His mercy comes for you, to mercy you and rescue you; to find you and restore you. That you **may have life and have it abundantly**. Life in Christ and under His care. Life not alone and on your own. Life that not even death can end. For the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for you, also took up His life again in the resurrection. And will, in mercy, raise you as well. That the life He gives here, not end here, but last forever.

Now, how He will do that for you may be different than the person sitting next to you. His mercy is the same, His Word is the same, but you are not all the same. And you are not all the same to Him. For, as we heard, *He calls you each by name*. Which means He doesn't treat us all the same, but exactly as He knows we need. That sometimes upsets people - that God doesn't treat us all the same. They think that He is unfair and unloving because He blesses some more and some less, and gives to some more and some less. **But on the contrary, that only proves His love**. For no parent treats their children all the same, for they are not all the same. They have different needs and require different care. So it is with our Good Shepherd. He calls you each by name. And while He may treat you differently, it is always with the same mercy, the same love, and for the same end: that **you have life and have it abundantly**. That you have life in the forgiveness of your sins. That you may have

life not just here, but *both* here *and* forever.

And so what does that life look like? We heard it described in the reading from Acts today:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Or in other words, those who are mercied by God, mercy others. Which doesn't mean that our life together will look exactly like it did in the first century; we're different and the times are different. *But the mercy will be the same.* As I said in the beginning of this sermon, that mercy cannot be nailed down and defined in a set of rules, and won't always look the same. But rather, as we hear in these verses: mercy meets needs, prays prayers, speaks the Word, forgives those who sin against us, and does not live for self, but in the communities where God has placed us.

And this is so for in mercying you and restoring you to the flock and giving you life, your Good Shepherd has given you His Spirit. And His Spirit, which lives in you, also lives *through* you. For though you were passive in receiving that life and Spirit, that life is not now passive, but active. For animated by the Spirit of Christ, you will be like Christ, the Spirit working in you to conform you to the image of Christ. That you be merciful, even as your Father in heaven is merciful. Your Father who in mercy sent His Son, who in mercy sent His Spirit. And the Spirit who in mercy now leads you to the Son, who in mercy takes you to the Father. *Do you see how Jesus is the door?* And thus reunited to God through Him, the Author and Giver of life, you have life. Abundant life.

And now your Good Shepherd comes again in mercy, to feed you; to feed the life He has given you with His own Body and Blood. To strengthen you with His forgiveness, to uphold you with His Spirit, and keep you in Himself. That we may no longer be sheep who love to wander, but sheep who love our Shepherd, ***devoted to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*** So come now, at the call of your Saviour. Come now, to His mercy and forgiveness. Come now, and eat the food of His pasture, which gives eternal life. For ***the Lord is your Shepherd,*** and so ***surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.***

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.