



# Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

## **“My Sheep”** Rev. David K. Groth

*“But you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. 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” (John 10:26-28).*

**April 21, 2013**

## Collect of the Day

Almighty God, merciful Father, since You have wakened from death the Shepherd of Your sheep, grant us Your Holy Spirit that when we hear the voice of our Shepherd we may know Him who calls us each by name and follow where He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

In our text Jesus is having a rather blunt and difficult conversation with a small crowd. The dialogue is going back and forth, but making no progress. Finally he acknowledges a simple truth. “You do not believe because you are not part of my flock.” Did you hear it? “You do not believe”, a judgment made by the one who will also be doing the judging on the Last Day. They had no idea how devastating those words were – nor the consequences of that unbelief. “You do not believe.” Notice that also places the blame squarely on them. They can blame no one else. **You** do not believe. You are not part of my flock.

It makes me think of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer. The Lord tells Hosea to give his son the name Lo-Ammi as a sort of living sermon to the people. Lo-Ammi means “not my people”. “Call his name Lo-Ammi” the Lord says, “for you are not my people, and I am not your God” (Hosea 1:9).

Do you realize how devastating and momentous that was? God was rejecting his people. He was breaking the covenantal relationship with them. Because of the people’s unfaithfulness, the marriage with God was coming to an end. The Hebrew literally says God’s people had gone off “a-whoring after other gods.” Therefore, “not my people.”

Many times before God had been angry at his people for their adulterous ways, but yet he always called them “My people.” “O my people, what more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it. When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? My people, is this how you thank your God?” (From the liturgy for Good Friday). Sometimes you can sense the deep sadness, sometimes you can sense the hot anger, but at least, it was always “my people.” Here, for the very first time, the people hear the

words, “Lo Ammi”, “You are *not* my people and I am *not* your God.” Ultimately the Lord would relent and keep his covenant, but for a time the people had assumed God had finally forsaken them.

Similarly, in the Gospel lesson today, we hear the awful pronouncement: “You are not part of my flock.” Jesus wasn’t telling that crowd anything they didn’t already know, but he is clarifying things, (for them and for us), and there’s value in that. If anyone thinks they can ride the fence between the world’s religions, or somehow invent their own religion made up of a mishmash of this and that, well Jesus clears up those misconceptions. “You do not believe. You are not part of my flock.” If anyone thinks lukewarm is a nice temperature, Jesus spews that out too. If anyone assumes it is enough in God’s eyes to be decent and kind, but that faith really isn’t necessary, to that he says, “You do not believe in me. You are not part of my flock.”

It’s a matter of faith, of believing rightly. So Jesus goes on to describe what it does mean to have faith. First he says, “My sheep hear my voice.”

Once there was a stray dog trotting through our neighborhood. It was a hot, dry day. . . his tongue was hanging way out and he looked like he had been out a long time. Clearly, he needed water and he needed help. I tried calling to him. I tried coaxing him. I used my best come hither voice. I tried to be as welcoming and winsome as I could be. But he wanted nothing to do with me. He paused and looked at me, but would not approach me. When I tried to approach him he slunk away as if I were a threat to him. He didn’t know my voice. The more I called and whistled the faster he ran away.

Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice.” His sheep come at the invitation of his voice. We can and should be kind, welcoming and winsome to those outside the church. We can and should do acts of mercy and provide food for the hungry, gas cards for the poor, and

so on. We can and should love as we have been loved. But in the end, if the folks we are reaching out to refuse to hear his voice, refuse to hear his Word, there's not much we can do to help them. Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ."

Many today say they are plenty spiritual, just not religious. They don't feel they need the church. They feel they are fed spiritually by movies and music and the like. But God promises to feed us by Word and Sacrament, and nowhere else. He promises to locate himself in these means. And Word and Sacrament ministry happens in the church.

It's Good Shepherd Sunday, and one of the things the Good Shepherd does is gather his flock. In the Bible, the one who strays away from the flock to do his own thing, following his nose from one tuft of green grass to the next until he is totally lost and separated from the flock, that's the one that's as good as dead out there in the wilderness. It's just a matter of time. Someone has to go out and find it and bring it back and restore it to the flock. Today, at least in action, people are saying "Who needs a church?" Turns out that God thinks we need a church, and that even he needs the church because that's where he promises to be for us in Word and in Sacrament.

By the way, regarding those inactives, one of the things we keep hearing from them is how hurt they were that no one called or said anything when they dropped away. They thought someone would notice, someone would call, and when nobody did, they were miffed and they hardened their hearts. Ministering to inactives is a responsibility that belongs not just to me and the elders. When you notice someone has gone missing, don't ask, "What is the church doing about that?" You are the church. You call on him too, because you know him. Just ask him if everything is ok, and tell him that we miss him. When the church stops caring, it dies.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. That's mostly Good News. The down side is he knows our sin and rebellion. There's no hiding it from him. The up side is that he knows what we need. He knows what we fear. He knows what we hope for. He knows what our enemies are up to. Psalm 121, "He who watches over you will neither slumber nor sleep." While *you* sleep, he's there, not sleeping, but rather keeping watch over his flock by night.

My grandfather had a small dairy farm with just eighteen cows. We visited often but I never really got to know the cows. To me a Holstein was a Holstein was a Holstein. To grandpa, who was with them all the time, they had names. Even from a distance he knew them. He knew their personalities, habits, their preferences, their quirks.

So also with the Good Shepherd. He is not on duty just some of the time. He is the untiring Shepherd of Israel. Therefore, you are not an anonymous one of many. He knows your name. He knows everything there is to know about you, when you sit and when you rise . . . your words before you say them (Ps. 139). He cares so much that he even bothers to know the number of hairs on your head.

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. That's what a disciple does: he learns from and follows his or her master. A part of what this means is that the world will identify us by our actions. Good works don't save us, but they do identify us. John 13:35, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Not by the color of our skin or our ethnicity. Not by the cars we drive or the jobs we have, but by our love they will know we are his disciples. Where there is faith, there will be works. And from John 14, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (v. 15).

My sheep hear my voice. I know them. They follow me. "I give them eternal life." Can he say it any clearer? Eternal life is a gift, not a reward. We don't earn it. If a gift is anything, it's free.

That word "give" changes everything! It changes our motivation for doing works from that of fear that we won't make the cut to joy and thanksgiving that he gives us eternal

life. That word give also changes the way we look at death. If we don't earn eternal life, but rather he gives it to us then we can know with a certainty where we are going when we die. There's a certain assurance and confidence that we have and that doesn't come about any other way. In John chapter 5 Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes . . . has eternal life . . . He has crossed over from death to life." So eternal life is a present possession. Because of faith, we have it already. That has an impact on our fears doesn't it? Those who own the last hour don't need to fear the next minute. So that word "give" offers us a certain peace that surpasses all human understanding.

"I give them eternal life and they shall never perish." To perish is to be separated from God and life forever. That's not going to happen to us, because our Shepherd has laid down his life for his flock. When we die, life is changed, not ended.

Finally, Jesus concludes by saying, "No one can snatch them out of my hand." You're not just sitting in a chair. You are resting in his hand, and that is a very safe place to be. However weak and hapless the sheep, under the Good Shepherd, they are perfectly safe.

Many refuse to believe and are not part of his flock. But you believe, so hear again the Good News: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Amen.



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