



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EASTER May 11, 2014

“The Lord is My Shepherd”

(Psalm 23)

Rev. David K. Groth

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**

The possessive pronoun “my” is an important word. If you’re a mother, you can say “That is a child” or you can say, “That is my child.” Notice the difference? That word “my” packs quite a punch. When a mother says “my child” there’s a love and strength and commitment backing up that pronoun. That’s why we give thanks for our mothers, but also to God who gives mothers such passion on our behalf.

Similarly, we can say, “This is a church” and for some of you that would be the most accurate thing to say because you’re not a member of this church or because you are a member in name only and someone dragged you here today. Or, you can say, “This is my church” which means you own it. It’s yours. You care about its mission and welfare.

You can think of the United States as “a country.” Or you can think of it as “my country.” You will risk more for one than you will the other, right? The word “my” packs a lot of punch for so small a word.

Thanks be to God that Psalm 23 does not teach us to say, “The Lord is a Shepherd.” The Lord is not one of many, and he’s not unknown to us. He’s not a stranger to us nor we to him. He’s not any old shepherd. This Shepherd is the Lord: the one who knit you together in your mother’s womb, the one who has had mercy on you, the one who loves you. That one is not a shepherd. He’s my shepherd, your shepherd.

“The Lord is my Shepherd.” Faith resides in that pronoun. The one who has no faith really cannot say, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Unbelief says, “I don’t need nor want him as my Shepherd.” Unbelief says, “The Lord might be a Shepherd to

others, but he's not my Shepherd."

I fear for those who cannot say, "The Lord is my Shepherd", because in rejecting the Lord, they are rejecting the Lord's forgiveness, and without that we are lost and condemned. In Paul's words, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus." Jesus is the one; Jesus is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the flock to provide for us the forgiveness we need.

He died for all, and won forgiveness for all, but that forgiveness does not automatically become the property of every man, woman and child. Nor is it a privilege given to every member of this church simply because his name is on the roster. Forgiveness is something we can receive only by faith in him. That's why it's so important to be able to confess, "The Lord is *my* Shepherd." Martin Luther once said, "Many are lost because they cannot use possessive pronouns."

Let's go in a little deeper. C.S. Lewis wrote, "If Christianity is not true, it is of no importance whatsoever; if it is true it is of infinite importance. What it cannot be," he contended, "is moderately important."

The same can be said of this verse, "The Lord is my Shepherd." If that's true for you, then it needs to be of infinite importance to you. It cannot be only moderately important. No one can say "The Lord is my Shepherd when I feel like following him", or "He's my Shepherd when it's convenient for me." Nor is it fair to live in such a way that says "I don't really need him leading me right now, but he had better be there for me when I'm walking through the valley of the shadow of death!" It doesn't work that way. He either is or is not your Shepherd, and if he is, that fact informs your life, it is the supreme fact of your life.

He's not a part-time Shepherd who cares little for the sheep; and so we cannot be part-time followers of that Shepherd, who are mostly indifferent and want little to do with him and the rest of the flock. It's one way or another. Biblically speaking, you are either a sheep of his own fold, or you're out there somewhere in the wilderness. You are

either a lamb of his own flock, or you're on your own. But the Lord is never "kinda, sorta" your Shepherd.

That is, everyone likes the *notion* of having the Lord as his shepherd . . . more than he likes the reality of a shepherd leading him around. After all, this shepherd might take us to places where we don't want to go, and make us do things we don't want to do. "The Lord is my Shepherd". Everyone wants those words to be said at their funeral, but not everyone wants to live those words while yet kicking.

When pastors get together, the conversation often drifts to the topic of the decline of the Christian church in America. It is real. It is measureable. And it is happening fast. Lutheran churches and schools are closing every day it seems, and those that aren't are struggling. In our culture, there's a certain indifference in the air today toward the Christian faith, even among many of those who consider themselves Christians. You can almost measure it at the congregational level. It's there in the struggle to find volunteers for church ministries, like VBS. It's there among school parents who join a church to get the tuition discount, but don't really care about the church. It's "a" church to them, one that happens to operate "my child's" school. It's not, "my church." And it's there in the financial struggle of the church and the missions of the church. (Over at Lake Country Lutheran High School the cars in the student parking lot are on the whole nicer and newer than the cars in the faculty parking lot. What's up with that? (When Jonathan starts parking his rig over there that will bring the average down some!))

In Matthew 24, when Jesus spoke about the signs of the end times, he said, near the end, "The love of many will grow cold." I find that to be a haunting statement because I submit that's where we are. We live in a culture that does not use that little pronoun "my" with any integrity. And in fact it's a culture that is far more comfortable with "The Lord is a shepherd" even as it is more comfortable with saying that Jesus is "a" way to the Father, rather than "the Way, the Truth and the Life." You know, what's happening

in your culture can happen in your own life as well. The culture can exert that kind of influence on us. It's nearly imperceptible, but if we're not careful, it will be the culture and not the Shepherd that leads us.

A harmless example: When we named our first child "Emily", Gail and I both thought it was a unique and uncommon name. It wasn't until Emily got into school when we learned a bunch of her classmates were also named Emily. We thought we were being independent and unique, when in fact we were marching right along with the culture. Same thing happened last year when we named our new dog. My two submissions (Uwe and Gunther) were quickly vetoed. I, in turn, vetoed Mowgli, Bagheera and Shere Khan. So, we named him Toby. None of us much loves the name, but it got through the veto process. And we thought it was sort of unique; we had never met an animal named Toby. It wasn't until later that I learned Toby is among the top ten names for dogs in the country, right there with Max and Cooper.

The point is, beware of the time and place in which you live, because the culture exerts enormous influence on you in ways you won't even perceive. And the culture in which you live is quickly distancing itself from the Christian faith. It's a pluralistic culture that would much prefer you to confess, "The Lord is a shepherd" rather than "The Lord is my Shepherd."

Again, that little word "my" packs a powerful punch. And we sometimes fail to use it with any integrity. That's why it is so comforting to hear the Lord use that possessive pronoun, for example when he says, "my people" and "my sheep." There's immeasurable love and dedication and sacrifice backing up his use of the word "my." In John 10 he says, "I know my sheep." He calls us by name; we are not strangers to him. He knows everything about us. He knows what we need: green pastures, quiet waters. He knows what we fear: the valley of the shadow of death. He knows how to protect and guide us, with his rod and staff. He knows what we love: the feeling of perfect security: he even

prepares a table in the presence of our enemies. And he knows what we will need in the future: goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And he knows what will be most important when we die: he restores my soul . . . and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

“My sheep.” In spite of our wandering, in spite our foolishness and stubbornness, in spite of being so vulnerable and yet so oblivious to those vulnerabilities, in spite of our sin and rebellion, in spite of everything, he still calls us my sheep.” There’s immeasurable grace in that possessive pronoun “my”. Ps. 100: 3, “It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” But we are not all identical in his sight, nor do we all have the same needs nor is his love for us diluted by the size of the flock. St. Augustine wrote our omnipotent God so takes care of every one of us as if there were none but one to take care of (*Confessions*).

When he calls us “my sheep”, that claim on us is far stronger than any claim we make on him when we call him “my shepherd.” When he calls us “my sheep” that is also infinitely and eternally more important. Baptized into his name, he doesn’t give us reason to wonder where we stand in relation to him. We know he loves us. After all, this is the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the flock. Who would do that? We’re just sheep. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” It must mean he loves us.

One last thing. If you haven’t already, I would suggest you commit this Psalm to memory, the whole thing. And if you struggle with memorizing, at least get those first five words down. “The Lord is my Shepherd.” Those are among the most important words in Scripture. And when you say those words, put a little emphasis on that possessive pronoun, for the Lord is not just any old shepherd. He is “my Shepherd.” And remember when he uses that possessive pronoun, as in “My Sheep”, he takes it to a whole new level of love and dedication and sacrifice, and opens up a whole new world for us. Thanks be to God. Amen

