

Easter 3 2020

John 10:11-16

St. John Lutheran Church, Palmer, KS

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Jesus said: “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.”**

Christian faith is always deeply personal, but it is never private. It can never be just me and Jesus “forget all the rest; I don’t need them.” It can never be, “I’ll believe what *I* want to believe, and the rest can just leave me alone.”

No. We are part of a flock. That’s where sheep belong. The lamb that wanders away gets eaten by the wolves. Even when our Lord teaches us to pray—a deeply personal activity—even there he teaches us to say, “*Our* Father.” That means I am part of the “our,” a family, a group, a body, a community of saints, a church. Yes, even the very word “church” means a gathering or assembly: a congregation around the voice of Jesus.

We are in this mess together. We inherit the mess together from the first Adam through whom came death and condemnation. Likewise, we inherit salvation together from the second Adam through whom came life and justification. We are in this mess together. But we also enter into glory together.

The Good Shepherd is one. The flock is one. One Lord. One faith. One baptism. As Jesus says: “I have other sheep that are not of this fold.” (That is, Gentiles who will believe even though they are not of the Hebrew bloodline.) **“I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”**

There aren’t other ways to salvation or alternative Good Shepherds. There is only Jesus. Only one is the way, the truth, and the life. And though we see the church divided in so many ways throughout the world, we believe and confess the Biblical truth that there is *one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church*. The church is one. One shepherd. One flock.

This is something that really bothers people. It probably bothers many of you. If the church is one, why are there so many denominations? And more than that, if the church is one, then what difference does it make if I am Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Reformed, or anything else?

We could spend a long time on this question. But let’s just make a beginning of it today.

The first thing to know is that the unity of the church is not a product of man's efforts or structures but a work of the Holy Spirit. All believers in Christ are united in Christ. The unity of the church is a gift of God and an article of faith. We don't create it. We confess it. It is not to be found in organizational structures, family ties, or anything else but the Word of God.

The story is told of a certain second-grade teacher named Mrs. Gibson. Now, Mrs. Gibson was a new teacher, but managing things well enough. One fine day her class was out to recess, running all about the schoolyard enjoying the beautiful weather. She decided she wanted to teach them a new game, and so she called out loudly: "Will Mrs. Gibson's second-grade class please get together!" A few boys gathered over by the ballfield, while a couple girls paired up over by the swings. Still other children ran from group to group confused as to whether they should be going here or there, toward these or those classmates. This went on for several minutes until Mrs. Gibson finally learned her lesson. Seeing that the students could not bring themselves together, she called out: "Will Mrs. Gibson's second-grade class please gather *to me!*" Then all the confused students ran toward her and the game could begin.

This is often how it is with Christians. So long as Christians think it is their work, their job, their merits that will bring about the unity of the church, they run here and there like second-graders on the schoolyard. Many become tossed about by ever new wind of false doctrine. Inevitably such efforts to force a manmade, outward "unity" by our works reduce themselves to asking: "How little of the Bible can we confess and still get away with looking like a church?" Maximal inclusion means minimal confession. They end up, as St. Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Tim. 3:5): "Holding to an outward form of godliness but denying its power."

But the true unity of the church is not found in man's efforts or institutions, nor is it found in his private feelings or sincerity. The true unity of the church is in the voice of Christ. "**I must bring them also,**" says Christ, "**and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**"

I know life gets confusing. Who knows what to make of these last two months? Americans can't decide whether to praise or excoriate their leaders. And life in the church can get confusing too. It happened even on the pages of the New Testament, not to mention the Old. But the point is, if we sheep are ever and always running toward the objective voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as it sounds forth from the pages of Holy Scripture, then we are gathering in the right direction. There, in the Word of God, in my Baptism, in Body and Blood of Jesus for me I find the full assurance of salvation that not man nor hell itself can overcome.

We call these things—the Gospel taught purely and the Sacraments given rightly—the marks of the church. The things of God mark the church, like signs mark the road. The things of God mark the church, and not necessarily the sign on the door. I can't know infallibly who is a believer and who isn't. Only God sees the heart. But I can know for sure that where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are given rightly, there the Holy Spirit is creating and calling true believers and bringing forth Christ's Church.

We do not and have never believed that the *one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church* is coterminous with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. At the same time, I have to tell you, one sheep to another, I'm so glad to be a Lutheran, and I hope you are too. To be a Lutheran, if we're doing it right, is to ever and always be pointing people to the voice of Jesus, our Good Shepherd.

Although we don't see an outwardly unified church on earth, we needn't be bothered by this. We believe that the true unity of the church is a given, worked in a hidden way by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word. We rejoice that even in churches where false teaching has crept in, enough of the voice of Jesus gets through so that there are many true believers there. We should love and cherish all believers in Christ, never despising them. They are members of the body of Christ and will be our fellows in the resurrection of the just.

At the same time, we ought to make like Mrs. Gibson's second-graders and say to our classmates: "Join us as we run together toward the voice of our teacher." We must never think: "It doesn't matter what direction I run, or which doctrines I believe."

We believe that justification and salvation are a gift of grace received by faith alone apart from any works or effort on our part. We believe with St. Peter that "Baptism saves you," and we confess that the true, yes-he-really-meant-what-he-said Body and Blood of Christ are eaten and drunk in the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of our sins. And we think that all Christians should believe these things, and we invite them to do so without compulsion. And we certainly ought to avoid all arrogance or thinking that we are thereby better than anyone else when we know full well that we are no less sinners who justly deserve God's temporal and eternal punishment.

If these last weeks have taught me anything, it's what a treasure, gift, joy, and privilege we have to come to church. Let us be glad to go unto the house of the Lord and never take it for granted again. But also what a joy to know that even in quarantine I remain a lamb in the flock of our Good Shepherd. Because there is no more beautiful voice than the authentic voice of Jesus which sounds forth from the inspired and infallible Scriptures. When the whole world is upside down, confused, and doesn't know what to think or where to go, we know which way to run.

To the voice of Jesus, dear saints! Do you not hear it? Even now the Good Shepherd calls out to you: "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."

*Come soon, Lord Jesus.*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.