

*Misericordias Domini*

John 10:11-16; Ezekiel 34:11-16

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He is Good because He laid down His life for the sheep. Adam and Eve were no match for that wolf Satan. You aren't either. He is much older and smarter than you are. He is much more wily than you are as well. Alone, you are as sheep sent to the slaughter. But you aren't alone. Jesus is your Good Shepherd and lays down His life to the wolf so that you don't have to. Death couldn't hold Jesus and He is still your Good Shepherd. He Shepherds you with His Word.

Jesus says, "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."

The voice of Jesus is what brings us into the sheepfold of the church and continues to shepherd and protect us. In your baptism, you received the Holy Spirit who teaches you Jesus' Word through that very same Word.

Jesus is the one Shepherd. That is obvious and easy to see. It is Jesus' church and not another. He is the Lord of the church. Not Governor Newsome nor District President Mike Gibson nor you or me. Jesus is the Lord of His church.

What's not obvious and easy to see is that there is one flock. It's hard to get an accurate count, but suffice it to say, there are a lot of denominations. By denomination I mean Christian denominations. I'm not talking about other religions. In Rialto alone there are, at least, 20 different "Christian" churches.

I'm not qualified to explain why there are so many denominations, but simple observation will tell you that these churches differ in what they teach.

For example, our church and some others in Rialto teach that Jesus Christ is present bodily in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Many other churches in Rialto teach that Jesus is not present bodily in the Lord's Supper but that it is just a memorial meal. Even with all the confusion in reasoning today, I think it's obvious that Jesus cannot both be present and absent from the consecrated bread and wine.

Some churches teach that Baptism is something God does for you and other churches teach that Baptism is something you do for God. Obviously, it cannot be both.

Some churches teach that good works are necessary but not necessary for salvation. Other churches teach that good works are necessary for salvation. It cannot be both.

Some churches teach that God created the world in six days. Other churches teach that God created the world over a long period of time with the mechanism of evolution. It cannot be both.

Some churches teach that you find Jesus in His Word and Sacraments. Other churches teach that you find Jesus apart from His Word and Sacraments which usually means you find Him in your heart and emotions.

Some differences are not essential to faith. For instance, if there's a church around here that didn't hear preaching on our Gospel reading today, that doesn't mean they didn't hear the Good Shepherd. We have Christian freedom on what set of readings we want to use. I certainly think there are better sets of readings than other, but the important thing is to hear Scripture because it is the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Some differences are essential to faith. Justification by grace alone through faith alone for the sake of Christ alone is critically important.

If you find your justification through some other means, even in small part, then you are no Christian. You may be nice or sincere, but you are no Christian.

With all these differing voices, how is an outsider, or even a Christian, supposed to know what the voice of Jesus is?

The only way to know what Jesus says is to hear, read, and know the Scriptures. The Bible reveals Jesus. Just as an infant learns who her family is by spending time with them, you learn who Jesus is by spending time with Him. And you do that by coming to a church that preaches purely and by knowing His Word.

Our founder, C.F.W. Walther wrote a book called "Church Fellowship." He addresses the problem of too many denominations. There really is nothing new under the sun. He says:

"A principal factor in the unspeakable corruption of the church just before the Reformation was, among others, the fact that Scripture was not permitted to be the only fountain from which all saving truth must be drawn, nor the only rule and norm according to which all teachers and teachings must be judged and evaluated, and therefore also not the only judge in all doctrinal controversies." (Walther's Works: Church Fellowship, pg. 337)

Scripture is the final authority for all we do. We use symbols or confessions as well to determine what Scripture says. The three creeds, our confessions which include both catechisms, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology, The Smalcald Articles, and the Epitome and Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord. These things teach us from Scripture who our God is and what He has done and continues to do for us. They teach us the Law which condemns us and teaches us. They teach us the Gospel where we find our assurance of salvation. They teach us the Sacraments our Lord mandated to convert us and feed us.

We use these things to test what people, including pastors, say about the Christian faith and life. Paul admonished the Thessalonians to “Test everything; hold fast to what is good (καλός)” (1 Thessalonians 5:21) Paul commended the Bereans because they examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was truly the voice of Jesus. (Acts 17:11)

This means that you are all theologians. Theology is nothing other than studying the Scriptures and Confessions to know Jesus. He is your God and you are His people. He is the Good Shepherd and you are His sheep. You get to know Jesus as sheep know their shepherd by studying the Scriptures and hearing the Word. Sheep are theologians.

I love how Klemet Preus defines how to do theology in his book “The Fire and the Staff” which the elders are reading: “There are two ways of doing theology. Both are right. One way is to look at what the Bible says... The other way of doing theology is to ask how a particular article of doctrine relates to the doctrine of justification.” (pg. 79)

The two questions, “what does the Bible say” and “how does it relate to justification” drives our understanding of our God and our Faith. To know what the Bible says you need to hear preaching and read the Bible.

God established proclamation as the means that His Word is heard and understood. This first applies to pastors who are called and ordained to proclaim the full counsel of God in a particular place. This is our understanding of the third commandment. “We do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it.” If pastor Holm and I are doing our job rightly, you hear the voice of Jesus which means sometimes you hear things you don’t like.

You also proclaim the Word of God to your neighbors. With this proclamation, your neighbor hears the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is active when you proclaim the Word to your neighbor.

God also caused His Word to be written down in the Old and New Testaments. And you don't have to know Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek to read the Bible! There are many fine translations out there where you see plainly what God says in the Bible. Sadly, we let the Bible sit on the shelf far too often. The Bible doesn't have to be the only thing in your life, but it should be the main thing. Jesus delivers Himself to you through His Word. And He shepherds you through that Word.

Jesus says, "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."

It may look like there are many flocks, but there is only one. The one true flock is spread throughout the whole world. It is full of sheep from all nations. It is full of sheep from all tongues. The Holy Spirit unites us into one flock by hearing the voice of our Shepherd, Jesus. And He makes an incredible promise to you:

"For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." (Ezekiel 34:11-16)

Jesus is your Good Shepherd. He has searched for you and made you His sheep. He feeds you and protects you. If you get lost, He will come and find you! He makes you lie down beside still waters. He will gather you into eternity where there will no longer be famine or wolf. He does all this with His mighty Word. Let us continue to nurse on His Word which delivers to us all the wonderful promises of God.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.