

Mark 6:30-34 The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things.

When we think of sheep, perhaps with the exception of some of you that have raised them, we think of those cuddly perfect white sheep that often are crafted into stuffed animals for children to play with.

But truth be told, sheep are not always quite that cuddly. And sheep left to take care of themselves are quite frankly a pitiful sight. Yes, sheep without a shepherd turn from cuddly balls of cotton into quite nasty creatures.

Sheep without a shepherd will stay in one place eating brown grass that has been trampled down. They will become infested with all sorts of parasites inside and out as they eat off soiled ground rather than continuing on better ground. They are always restless on their feet from fear of predators, the nuisance of pests, and from hunger. They will stubbornly follow their own instincts regardless of the past results of doing so. And they will follow the herd regardless of where it might be leading. And whenever they get the chance, they will let one another know who is in charge. They will fight one another to establish what some shepherds call a butting order, an order of authority in the flock. They can even end up lying flat on their backs not able to get up by themselves. In fact, many sheep often die in just that position. Yes sheep without a shepherd are not the cuddly balls of cotton we have become so familiar and captivated with.

In our text for today, Jesus looked out and saw a whole flock of shepherdless sheep coming His way. Jesus had just gathered His own sheep, the apostles, together and was leading them to still waters to restore their souls. And there across the fence, so to speak, stood this whole flock of shepherdless sheep. They must have been a miserable looking group. They were restless and infested with all sorts of trouble. They might as well have been lying helpless on their backs.

Now an ordinary shepherd beholding this sight might have felt for these sheep, but likely he would have left it there. After all, he had to take care of his sheep. And his sheep were tired and exhausted. The ordinary shepherd couldn't concern himself into action over those other sheep.

But the Good Shepherd Jesus had more compassion than any ordinary shepherd would. He could not allow those other sheep to continue to eat brown grass when He could give to them green pastures. He could not allow them any longer to drink from murky pools of water when He could lead them to pure still waters. He could not allow them to live in the restlessness of unforgiven sin when He could give them peace and restore their souls.

You and I live in an age of fences and firmly fixed property lines. Livestock belonging to one owner are kept in one place and livestock belonging to another owner are kept elsewhere. Concern for livestock outside of one's ownership may at times approach concern, but rarely goes beyond that. We look out for those animals already inside of our fences.

And perhaps all too often we take a similar approach to church as well. We are all pretty comfortable with sheep already gathered here at St. Paul's. We have decided to watch out for one another as a community. We know how these sheep work and for the most part we agree with them on how things should be done here in our pasture. We have throughout the decades established a butting order of sorts and are content to live with it. Yes, we might have some concern for those shepherdless sheep wandering around us at work, in school, or around the town. But our concern often remains only a concern and never turns into action.

This is not proper for us as sheep of the Good Shepherd. For while we might deep down be threatened by the idea new sheep, our Shepherd Jesus rejoices in them. And so should we.

St. Paul's is not just *our* church. It is one of the Good Shepherd's pastures where He wishes to feed all who will come. St. Paul's is one of the pastures in which the Good Shepherd fills hungry sheep with His words.

Yes that is how the Good Shepherd ultimately cares for His sheep, by feeding them His Word. Soon after where we ended our text for today, Jesus will literally feed this whole flock of shepherdless sheep that had followed Him into the wilderness. But before He filled their stomachs, He took care of more pressing needs. He sat those shepherdless sheep down and taught them many things.

Yes, Jesus feeds sheep through their ears because it is often their minds and their hearts that are more empty than their stomachs. And when Jesus feeds sheep, He does not provide them just a taste, but fills them to their full of His grace, His mercy, and His goodness.

Yes, as Jesus opens His mouth and speaks, the grasses turn green and grow all around these sheep. And through the Holy Spirit, those shepherdless sheep lay down in those green pastures and rest. At the feet of Jesus they find the rest that they have always desired. They find the food that can finally satisfy their hunger.

The mission of the church and of this church is all about allowing shepherdless sheep to wander into the pastures of God's grace and find rest there. God does the feeding. He does the work of causing faith. We just allow others to come into the pastures where we have first been fed.

And so I ask each of us to consider today as individuals and particularly as a church, are we allowing all the people that God wants to come and graze in this pasture we call St. Paul's. Or do with our words or actions put up fences around the pasture? Do we knowingly or not hide the green pastures of God's grace behind the wires and posts of our personal likings? Do people in our town even know this pasture is here and available for grazing?

It is easy at times to make a pasture so comfortable by placing up big fences that it actually stops other sheep from entering in. We can make it so wonderful for those who used to graze here and those of us still here, that we make it hard for those shepherdless sheep to even find their way into the pasture.

These are the types of considerations that deserve our attention as we think about how we allow any and all sheep to find their way into this pasture. As we begin today to listen to a different bible translation in worship, we must allow our thought to go beyond our personal preference and likes and we must think about those other sheep that might come to graze here. We cannot simply stick with our preferences if that makes the Word of God barely edible to others that might come.

But it goes beyond this one issue. We must ask ourselves other questions like these. When shepherdless sheep so wander into this pasture, do we welcome them in freely to graze or question in our minds if not aloud why they are even here? Do we treat them like they have entered the free pastures of God's grace or do we act as if they are trespassing into our church? Do we baulk when they question one of our fences, one of our ways of doing things?

Yes, it might seem best for us as sheep to just put up our fences and rest with our Shepherd Jesus. But our text is clear, our rest can never rob others of the same.

We are sheep of the Good Shepherd and we know the benefit of living with the Good Shepherd each day. We know the benefit of having a Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. And so we want to make this pasture where that Good Shepherd is present just as open as possible for anyone that would want to come here and meet that Shepherd.

And so we must in doing this be willing to put aside our preferences and take down our fences in order that others might see the pasture that is here and the Shepherd that walks through that pasture. For shepherdless sheep are miserable bunch, but we, sheep of the Good Shepherd, are well fed and well take care of. We are watered at the font in baptism and fed at the altar to our fill.

We are sheep of the Good Shepherd. Today again we are fed. We pray that all others might join us.
Amen.