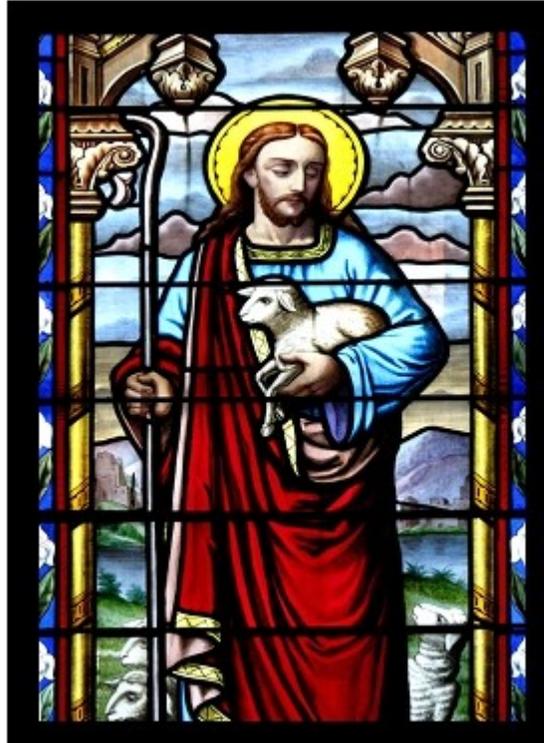


All of the Sheep are in the Shepherd's Flock
Delivered 09/10-11/2022 (Proper 19; the 14th Sunday after Pentecost)
At both Grace, Traverse City & St. Paul's, Elk Rapids



Jesus the Good Shepherd Window at St. Paul's

Friends, I am acutely aware that Jesus the Good Shepherd is standing right behind me in the central stained-glass window at St. Paul's. And I don't want to do or say anything that would taint or discolor that beautiful image; however, if in today's Gospel lesson Jesus were giving actual best practices advice for shepherds, then that would make Jesus the worst shepherd in all of Israel! No actual shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep unsupervised in the wilderness to go look for a single sheep. The flock was the only thing standing between the shepherd's family and starving to death. Of course the shepherd would protect the flock; but, there's a certain expected loss each season – a cost of doing business – and this 1% loss is definitely in that margin. There were predators that would take sheep from the flock. Further, sheep can't breath when they are upside down and are known to die that way when they get top-heavy around the end of the season before shearing. So, sheep are going to die every year and any reasonable shepherd would accept this. And that is why I suspect that the original hearers of this teaching found it to be entirely ridiculous.

In fact, maybe that's the point. Jesus isn't speaking about sheep; He's speaking about the love of God. And, frankly, the love of God is ridiculous! It isn't logical; it isn't rational; it's emotional; it's entirely unjustifiable. The love of God is relentless. It never let's anyone go. God never assumes a loss and claims it as the "cost of doing business." We don't deserve God's love; no one does. And yet God gives it anyway. And God doesn't ask any prerequisite questions. God finds us, wherever we are and loves us. The Good Shepherd might ask if we want to walk beside him or be carried upon those almighty shoulders; but, there's no accusations or interrogations. There's no "what have you done?!" or "a fine mess you've gotten yourself into now!" or even any "do you know how much trouble you've caused Me?!" Jesus simply pursues us until we are found. Jesus traverses the very same wilderness we wander in, sees what we have seen, feels what we have felt, and continues to come to us to invite us

home. And God does this each and every time we wander in the desert, each and every time that we are lost. And Jesus never denies that we took the journey; this isn't forgive and forget. This is Jesus inviting us to navigate our pain, our trauma, our lostness with Him journeying with us along the way. Jesus will show us a new path through our desert, a glimpse of beauty along the journey that we could not see before, how the whole appearance of the landscape of our wanderings looks different when Jesus is walking by our side.

Which leads to the second point of good news in this lesson. Jesus expects us to be lost from time to time, and maybe even quite regularly, and we should expect the same. Every time we grow, change, deepen, or mature, life will be new all over again. In this newness, it can take time to adjust to the new normal. That feeling like life has shifted, is no longer familiar, is a touch of feeling lost. This can especially happen after the death of a close loved one, a friend, or a neighbor. And it doesn't have to be because of something as painful as a death. This feeling of lostness can come after moving to a new house; after retiring; or after changing jobs. There are so many events, both blessings and challenges, that can leave us feeling like life doesn't make sense anymore. And then there's other times, sometimes with less-explainable causes, where our prayer life feels dry, unhelpful, or useless. We struggle for the words to pray or the familiar words that once brought comfort now feel like sand in our mouths. In such times, we must do everything we can to stay open to being found. We must pray anyway, we must be relentless like the searching shepherd is relentless. Jesus assures us that our lostness cannot actually separate us from the love of God. The Good Shepherd will keep on searching for us for as long as it takes and even if means wandering in the desert for forty years looking for us! That's the good news, indeed!

But the good news so often comes with a challenge to live differently and this lesson is no exception to that. Did you notice this detail: all 100% of the sheep were in the shepherd's flock at the beginning, while the one sheep was lost, and when they were all together at home? Now, that's not a lesson in ignoring diversity; not at all. We've talked before about how uniformity is the antithesis of unity. No, this is a reminder that we are united by the very first name God ever called us; for, each and every one of us was first called Beloved by the Author of Love, the ground of all Being. But we've gotten so used to having a divided world, of having names of division and derision to hurl at our enemies, that we gloss right over this important detail from the story. And it is a remarkable detail that all of the sheep remain in the one flock throughout this whole ordeal. That, too, of course is about the love of God. No one is left out, no one is outside the flock even if they wander away. But we, too, are called to love like that to the best of our ability. We are to live and love like there aren't divisions between an "us" and a "them." And that's why this is not a story about the in-crowd evangelizing the lost, the heathen, the atheist, or the sinner. The grumbling leaders that Jesus was speaking to this day might have heard it that way; but, Jesus was teaching them a lesson that goes far deeper. This is a lesson about "lostness," and "foundness," and loving our neighbors just as God has loved us all. This is about living a life that actually looks like we know what it means to be lost, to be found, to be loved, and to love. And so, let's all ask ourselves this week: how will we change our lives to live like we all actually belong to God's one flock?

~The Rev. Dr. Derek J. Quinn, Deacon