

Easter 2 (2024)

One thing that sets St. Luke's apart from many churches today is that our doors are open.

From around 8 a.m. to sometime in the afternoon a sign hangs out front proclaiming, "Our doors are open, Everyone welcomed."

Sadly, this is not the case in many places. It is easier to get into a prison than a place to pray.
/// And people do come!

If I happen to meet some visitors, I often ask them if I can give them a tour of the church. Most of the time they take me up on the offer.

My little spiel usually ends in the narthex.

There, if there are not a lot of people around, I invite them to open the door of the women's restroom.

When they do, they see Jesus standing knocking . . . at the door of the women's restroom no less! Usually, there are some chuckles as they view this stained-glass window.

Then, I direct their attention to the corresponding window in the stairwell leading down to Thomason Hall. It is of Jesus and the sheep.

I explain that there is theological significance in the placement of these two windows. They represent two parallel lines of Christian truth: the **seeking Saviour** represented by Jesus and the sheep balanced by the **waiting Saviour** represented by Jesus standing at the door of the human heart knocking.

The Seeking Saviour comes seeking us long before we see Him. He takes the initiative in calling men and women to faith.

BUT He does not barge in uninvited. He waits for us to say yes to His overtures of love mercy and grace.

“Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me,” we read in Revelation 3:20.

Both images are important and represent what is taught in the Bible. However, it the image of Jesus and the sheep that calls for our attention this morning.

After all, there are references to shepherds in both today’s Epistle and Gospel. Hence, this Sunday – the Second Sunday after Easter -- is known as “Good Shepherd Sunday.”

Sheep are cute and cuddly. As a boy, I remember attending the state fair where some were on display in the agriculture barn. I would

plunge my hands into their soft wool. It felt mighty good.

It is tempting to lapse into sentimentality as we think of sheep, but let's not go down that path.

They are cute and cuddly, but they are also stupid and prone to wander. Often, they stand in need of rescue. That is a good picture of us humans, as well.

Before I go further, let me say, if this is where you find yourself this morning, away from God and hope, in a state of despair and lostness, you don't have to listen to anything else I say. Just get this: Be found of Him without delay.

Let Him bring you to the place of safety and peace. That is paramount. ///

I want to move now to Jesus' words in today's Gospel about being the Good Shepherd.

Let's stop at the word 'good'. The Greek word which stands behind it is *kalos*. *Kalos* denotes goodness which can be seen. Put another way, it suggests attractiveness of character.

Jesus had this attractiveness. As such, He stands in stark contrast to certain other 'shepherds' of God's people, in particular the Jewish religious leaders of the day.

In the chapter immediately preceding the one from which today's Gospel comes, Jesus has given sight to a man born blind. The Pharisees interrogate the now-seeing man . . . and then his parents. They treat both shabbily and shamefully.

These religious leaders were bad shepherds. They laid on God's people burdens too heavy to

bear. They were more concerned about the letter of the Law, rather than the spirit. They acted abominably and were thus unattractive.

By contrast, Jesus lifted burdens. He brought relief and healing. He came setting those in the captivity of sin free.

Just before we picked up reading, we hear Him say: **“I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly.”**

In the Jewish religious leaders, we find a warning to those in positions of Christian leadership today, especially those in the ordained ministry.

A good minister of Jesus Christ is not just one who can preach or teach well, who is orthodox in his or her beliefs and attends to the needs of those entrusted into his or her care in a satisfactory manner, but one whose goodness

exceeds these things. There should be a winsomeness of character.

I will offer one example of one who fell short of this ideal, one who lacked this attractiveness. I am thinking of a certain Roman Catholic priest . . . though for sure, there are many Protestant ministers who fill the bill as well.

On one occasion, prior to a funeral, outside in the church parking lot, this priest publicly berated one of his members for the way he had parked as visitors looked on.

One of these visitors was member of St. Luke's and reported this man's appalling behavior to me.

The 'take-away' is that clergy should strive to live lives in which goodness shows . . . but the same should be said of all the baptized.

Peevishness, bad temper, putting angry and mean stuff on Facebook – all – are unattractive. They cause people to turn off what one says with one's mouth.

Remember, people are watching you. What do they see? We all should strive – though I am sure we all fall short many times – to be *kalos* Christians, Christians whose goodness shows.

But Jesus is *Good* in other ways as well. Not only is He attentive to the needs of the sheep . . . leads them beside the still waters and all that . . . He knows and calls them by name.

In today's world, it is easy for people to be reduced to a number or worse. I have a friend who up to recently worked as nurse in a prison. The staff were not supposed to call the inmates by their names.

As a Christian, my friend ignored this protocol. He greeted them by their name when

he met them in the hall or when providing services. He gave them the respect everyone created in the image of God is due.

The world dehumanizes; Christ rehumanizes. He is come that the divine image marred by sin might be restored. The Good Shepherd knows and calls us by our names.

He knows you, not as a number, but as beloved child. Think about it and give thanks. Treat others in this same way. ///

But there is more. The *Good* Shepherd lays down his life for His sheep.

Whether any shepherd out there in the field actually did that, it is hard to say. But that is what Christ did on the cross for you and me. Receive its benefit. Look up and see Him hanging there and say: He loved me this much.

And, if you ever find yourself doubting your self-worth, know that is the devil speaking. The cross says otherwise.

Out from that, strive to have the same self-sacrificing love for your fellow Christians. Share their pain and bear their burdens. Love makes every load light.

Finally, there is one last aspect of Jesus as the Good Shepherd that calls for our attention. When Jesus made this declaration, He was using more than a metaphor. He was in fact giving Himself a God title.

How so? Well, we have only to look at Ezekiel 34 in the Old Testament. In this chapter, Yahweh denounces the shepherds of Israel. He is speaking of their kings. The accusation He lodges against them is that they have fed themselves and not the sheep. Sounds like some of our elected officials today, doesn't it?

More than that, Yahweh says what He is going to do about this situation. He says He is coming to be the shepherd over His people.

So, when Jesus came announcing ‘I am the Good Shepherd’, He was saying, I am the fulfillment of this prophecy.

Jesus is more than another prophet, more than an inspired teacher, more than a religious revolutionary, He is God with us.

What this means is that the true King has landed and is reigning. He is the real deal.

If you have been united to Him in faith and baptism, you are on the winning side. His peace is your peace. His mission your mission.

As God the Father raised Him after He had fallen asleep in death, so will He raise you. Because Jesus lives, we shall live also.

So: Live confidently. Love boldly. Serve unflinchingly.

Let Him not only be your Saviour but your example.

In closing, don't leave the Good Shepherd in the window in the stairwell leading to Thomason Hall. Let Him – risen and reigning -- inform all you say, think and do. Dare yourself to be 'good'.