

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church – Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Tempe, Arizona
Fourth Sunday of Easter
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Sermon by Pastor Christopher Pflughoeft
Jesus is your trustworthy shepherd

²²Then the Festival of Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple area in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around Jesus, asking, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." ²⁵Jesus answered them, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I am doing in my Father's name testify about me. ²⁶But you do not believe, because you are not my sheep, as I said to you. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all. No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰I and the Father are one." — John 10:22-30 EHV

On this Mother's Day, I cannot help but think about the beautiful relationship between parents and their children. This is especially the case at the beginning of life. The immediate trust that a newborn baby has for his parents astounds me. Immediately after the baby exits his mother's womb, he relies on his parents. Their warm embrace calms him. Their voices soothe him. They give him what he needs to survive. The newborn baby doesn't rationalize why he ought to trust his parents. He does not think, "Well, she carried me in her body for 9 months. He took care of her during that time. They also look nice." No! The newborn baby simply knows to trust his parents. They are his trustworthy parents. The relationship between parent and baby can be a picture of the sort of trust the sheep have for their Good Shepherd, Jesus. We are the sheep of Christ's pasture. As his sheep, we trust in him like a baby trusts in his parents. In today's gospel, we see the imagery of how believers trust in the Lord. Jesus speaks about God as the Father who is one with the Shepherd. In today's gospel, you can see that Jesus is your trustworthy shepherd.

This message takes place about two months after the previous Good Shepherd discourse. Likely, Jesus did not stay in Jerusalem for those two months. The indication that he is in Jerusalem is probably John indicating that Jesus returned to Jerusalem. Jesus was in Jerusalem on that day for the celebration of a festival called, "The Festival of the Dedication." This is a holiday that is now known as Hanukkah. Jesus went to observe this feast.

What is the Festival of Dedication or Hanukkah? It is a festival that commemorates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 164 B.C. The Seleucid king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, had defiled the temple. He even made unclean offerings like those of pigs in the temple. There was a Jewish revolt led by Judas Maccabeus, which drove out the oppressors. They then restored the temple. This account and the restoration of the temple can be read in a non-Biblical but historical book called 1 Maccabees.

Before we dig a little deeper into this account, it is interesting to see that Jesus observed this holiday as the ultimate cleansing of the temple wouldn't be done by the Maccabees but by him. He was the truly pure one in whom God dwelt among his people. Jesus is the trustworthy purifier.

On this festival day, Jesus was at the temple. He was in a portion of it called "Solomon's Portico" or "Colonnade" or "Porch." Some believe this to have been a portion of the temple that remained from Solomon's temple. We cannot say this for sure, however.

While Jesus was there at the temple, some of the Jewish people encircled around him. They were angry with Jesus. If you continued reading past our text for today, you would see that clearly as they grab stones with a desire to kill Jesus. In their anger, they had a question for Jesus. They wanted to know why he did not tell them clearly whether or not he was the Messiah.

In some ways, I understand their questions. Why didn't Jesus tell them? Many people seem not to understand who Jesus was. Why didn't he make it clearer to them? Well, Jesus' answer gives us the reason. In all reality, Jesus had said these things clearly. The problem with their inability to understand was not with Jesus' teaching, but with their faulty understanding. The problem is that they were not Jesus' sheep.

Jesus continues with a call back to the Good Shepherd discourse that he had taught two months earlier. Jesus was the Good Shepherd. His followers were the true sheep. The sheep listened to Jesus and knew his voice. The sheep of the Good Shepherd belonged to him. They would not be snatched away from his hand.

In Jesus' rebuke of those who wanted to kill him that day, he gives a wonderful message of comfort for his followers. They would not be able to be snatched from his hand. Jesus was a trustworthy shepherd. His sheep would not need to fear the attack of the wolves or any such enemies because they were safe in his loving embrace.

Dear friends, you are the sheep of Jesus' pasture. You are the ones who hear and know his voice. Much like physical sheep, you know only his voice. Sheep will not follow the voice of another shepherd. You have been brought to know and listen to Jesus alone. The Holy Spirit has brought you to this wonderful relationship with him. Because Jesus is your trustworthy shepherd, you also know that the Father in heaven is your Father. You have been brought into this wonderful relationship with God.

Do you fear losing this relationship? Perhaps you have been hurt before. With Mother's Day today and Father's Day next month, some too many people have lost loving relationships with their loved ones. Whether it was from a father who walked away... a mother who ruined the relationship through substance abuse... or an emotionally abusive situation, too many people have seen the destruction of these relationships that ought to be loving ones. Perhaps you are still wounded by a destroyed relationship with your mother and father, and that makes you think that someone could snatch you from the embrace of your shepherd.

Maybe you have had a broken marriage that makes you fear that you could lose a loving relationship. Whether it was a spouse who cheated, hurt you, or left, maybe this has wounded you and made you feel unlovable. When your spouse held another person in his arms, it made you feel like no one would want to hold you in their arms. Certainly not the God of the universe.

I wonder if that is how many men and women have felt in our country. Sadly, divorce rates seem to be just as prevalent in the church as they are in the outside world. I wonder if many people were betrayed by a spouse sitting here today. Does this make them feel like God could not love them?

Maybe you have had a broken friendship. You used to be very close to a person. You have many good memories with them. However, that person turned on you. Maybe that person stabbed you in the back. Now, your broken friendship makes you wonder if anyone would want to hold onto you. Your family members have to love you, you feel. Your friends at least chose to love you. Now, this friend has hurt you. Now, you don't see if your relationships can last.

Such pain is expressed in one of the psalms. In Psalm 55, David shares his hurt feelings by writing, "For it is not an enemy who insults me— I could bear that. It is not someone who hated me who rises against

me – I could hide from him. But it is you, a man who served with me, my colleague and my associate, with whom I shared pleasant discussions as we walked with the excited crowd at God’s house.” (Psalm 55:12-14). The pain of losing a friend can be immense.

Maybe you have felt such pain. Maybe you have been betrayed by a parent, spouse, or friend. Maybe their failure to hold you has made you fear losing relationships. Maybe this has made you look at yourself as if you are unlovable. Maybe you doubt anyone would hold onto you. Dear brothers and sisters, you may be tempted to apply these fears to your relationship with God. When a parent, spouse, or friend fails you, you may be tempted to fear that your Good Shepherd could fail you, too. You may fear that no one can be trusted, not even God.

If you feel unlovable and that no one can be trusted, allow Jesus’ Words to change your perspective. Maybe others can’t be trusted. Maybe you aren’t that lovable. Yet, Jesus loves the unlovable. Jesus’ trustworthiness comes from himself, not your ability to trust him. This is how much Jesus loves you. He died on the cross for you. “Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also graciously give us all things along with him?” (Romans 8:32). If God loves you so much to die for you, certainly he will hold you near and dear throughout this life. You are a sheep of his pasture. He will not let you go. Jesus is your trustworthy shepherd.

As your trustworthy shepherd, Jesus will hold you tight. He will hold you in his strong embrace when the wolves come by. He will hold you in his strong embrace when your fears are restless. Perhaps others have failed you, but he will not fail you. You do not need to fear that Jesus will let you go like others may have. Nothing at all can separate you from his love. This is as the Apostle Paul wrote, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither things present nor things to come, nor powerful forces, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39).

Therefore, as one who has a trustworthy shepherd who will never let you go, you can trust in him. When life’s challenges come your way, go to your shepherd. He can and will protect you. When the relationships crumble, when the family falls apart, when life’s stability is gone, go to the trustworthy shepherd. Now, how do you do this? Well, you have a shepherd who comes to you through his chosen means. He sends his Spirit through Word and Sacrament to deliver you peace. Listen to your shepherd’s voice. He speaks to you through the Word of the Bible. Be fed by your shepherd, he feeds you with his body and blood. Your trustworthy shepherd consistently and constantly comes to you through these means to strengthen you amid life’s battles.

Your Good Shepherd not only speaks to you, but he invites you to respond to him. You are invited to speak to him and to bring your problems to him through prayer. Maybe this is where the illustration starts to break down because sheep can only go “baaa!” but Jesus tells you to talk to him. Talk to him about your burdens. He will listen. He won’t divulge your secrets. He simply allows you to lay your burdens at his feet. As it is written, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:7). Your shepherd is trustworthy because he will listen. He will not share. Instead, he will act. He will do what is needed to care for you.

On this Mother’s Day, we can marvel at the care and love that parents have for their children. We also notice that children simply trust their parents. This relationship is not always perfect. No relationship is perfect. There will be times when parents are not trustworthy, and children do not trust them. Much like this, many relationships will not be perfect. You have an even greater relationship with your Good Shepherd. He will not let you go. He holds you tight in his hand. Jesus is your trustworthy shepherd. Amen.