

Psalm 23 (unison)

John 10:11-18

April 26, 2015

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

ONE FLOCK, ONE SHEPHERD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Thursday morning, I was among about two dozen pastors who were “appreciated” for an hour and a half at Harrells Christian Academy. At the personal invitation of different students from our congregations, we pastors gathered in the Joseph W. Newkirk Auditorium for a chapel service led by the third graders. Sixth and seventh graders also took part in the program.

For ninety minutes, with songs, prayers, skits, and scripture citations, the children thanked us for being their pastors. The majority of us agreed that the final song was the one that moved us the most. We were sitting in reserved seats, directly behind three or four rows of the younger children, most of whom were Windsor’s age. The other children surrounded us in the seats on the left and right sides in the auditorium. At one point during the final song, much to our surprise, all of the children jumped up, turned around to look at us, and started singing to us, “We call you pastor . . .” They did that two or three times during the song.

The children and their teachers obviously had worked very hard to get ready for Thursday’s program. Their “pastor appreciation” was much appreciated by the pastors. As we were enjoying some refreshments after the program, a colleague and friend from Clinton said, “That was very nice, but it was kind of strange being the center of attention like that.” Those of us standing around the table agreed with his sentiments.

The dictionary definition of “pastor” is “minister of a congregation.” The root word for our English word “pastor” is the same word in Latin, “pastor,” which means “shepherd.” This morning we have the opportunity to offer our own “pastor appreciation” as we worship the Good Shepherd or the Good Pastor. Our Opening Sentences, the three hymns, the Litany of Confession and Responsive Assurance of Pardon, the scripture lessons, and the Choral Benediction all focus our attention and our praise on the Good Pastor.

Once again this week, my friend and colleague, Chris Denny, pastor at the Elizabethtown Presbyterian Church, delivered not one but two appropriate musings in his blog called “Almost Daily Prayer – Passion for God.” Chris wrote two blogs/prayers based on the gospel reading from John 10 and the 23rd psalm. One has to do with his call as a pastor, the other has to do with God as our Good Shepherd.

Although the first blog does make reference to Chris’ call to be a pastor, I encourage you to hear his words and make them your own, as you think, not only about how the Good Shepherd calls you by name, but how God calls you to be a member of his flock. Here is Chris’ first blog:

Lord Jesus, I am glad to be among your flock. I remember hearing your voice first calling my name years ago through my parents, through the faithful saints of First Presbyterian, Sumter, SC, through those adults who cared enough to know my name and know me. And you keep calling over and over. I hear your voice. As a pastor, may I be your helper keeping the flock. I remember one of my mentors claimed his place as a sheepdog, listening to the voice of the shepherd, one among the sheep, guiding, caring, protecting, running ahead, circling behind, pushing forward, keeping together . . . Keep calling, Lord, help me be an obedient sheepdog, helpful to you, among the sheep, always by your side, quick to answer your call, attentive to the needs of those under my care, my head always ready to receive your loving pat, to hear those loving words, "Good boy!" May it be so today. Amen.

Chris' blog from yesterday is more of a prayer of thanksgiving to the Good Shepherd. As you hear his words, perhaps you can make them your own prayer of gratitude:

Thank you, Lord: For being my shepherd. For the green pastures I enjoy. For the still waters that restore my soul, For leading me in your paths, For walking beside me in the darkest times, For your discipline and saving embrace, For my seat at your abundant table, For surprising me with a place at the table of peace with my enemies, For blessing me, For an overflowing cup of blessing to share, For inviting me to make my home in your house. Truly, your Goodness, your Mercy are with me all the days of my life. Truly grateful am I. Amen.¹

The dictionary definition of the adjective "pastoral" is: "of shepherds or their work, way of life, etc.; characteristic of rural life, idealized as peaceful, simple, and natural." That's certainly the picture that Psalm 23 paints: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside the still waters; He restoreth my soul."

However, the Good Shepherd's job isn't always peaceful or easy. Psalm 23 also says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them." (John 10:11-12)

It's not always outside threats such as "the valley of the shadow of death" or "the wolf" that makes the Good Shepherd's job so hard. Here is a classic Prayer of Confession that points to another reason we need a Good Shepherd in our lives: *Almighty and most merciful Father; we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who*

*are penitent; according to thy promises declared unto humankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.*²

Over the years, I've heard many faithful folks in the church say something like, "I can read a story from the Bible over and over again for years, and then, one day, I read it again, and I notice something I've never seen before or paid attention to." That's what happened to me with John 10, "I am the good shepherd." I could have told you about the hired hand and the wolf snatching and scattering the sheep. I could have told you about the good shepherd laying down his life for the sheep. I could have told you about the good shepherd knowing his own and his own knowing him and recognizing his voice. But this week, as I read John 10, one verse jumped out at me. It's not that I had never read the verse before, but this week it overshadowed everything else in the story: "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. **So there will be one flock, one shepherd.**"

The footnote in my study Bible says, "*other sheep* are probably the Gentiles." But let's think about how that verse applies to us as "the sheep of God's pasture." Our flock – and I don't mean just the flock of Wallace Presbyterian Church – must keep our Good Shepherd mighty busy! If we were all one flock lying down in green pastures and relaxing beside the still waters, maybe our Good Shepherd could kick back and relax a little bit. However, as the Prayer of Confession so eloquently puts it, "We have erred, and strayed from Thy ways like lost sheep."

What are we to make of Jesus' claim, "So there will be one flock, one shepherd"? We can probably all agree on the second part of that statement – Jesus **is** our Good Shepherd. But what about the first part of the statement – "one flock"? The "Yellow Pages" section of the August 2014 Duplin County phone directory lists thirty-one different Christian denominations: African Methodist Episcopal; African Methodist Episcopal Zion; Apostolic; Assemblies of God; Baptist; Baptist Free Will; Baptist General; Baptist Independent; Baptist Missionary; Baptist Pentecostal Free Will; Baptist Southern; Catholic; Christian Disciples of Christ; Church of Christ; Church of God; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints; Full Gospel; Holiness; Interdenominational; Jehovah's Witnesses; Methodist; Methodist United; Missionary Baptist; Non-denominational; Pentecostal; Pentecostal Free Will Baptist; Pentecostal Holiness; Presbyterian; United Methodist; United Pentecostal; Wesleyan.

There are one hundred four different congregations listed under those thirty-one different denominations – and that's just in Beulaville, Clinton, Faison, Kenansville, Rose Hill, Wallace, and Warsaw, and just the churches that have their names and addresses and phone numbers listed. Imagine how many more congregations there must be, just in Duplin County! That's quite a scattered flock for our Good Shepherd to tend to.

But, isn't that the reason a flock has to have a shepherd – and not just any shepherd, not just a hired hand, but a good shepherd? A good shepherd who knows the sheep by name? A good shepherd who will leave the ninety-nine and look for the one who has wandered off? A good shepherd who will lay down his life for the sheep? A good shepherd who will bring **all** of his sheep into his fold? Because we err and stray from God's ways like lost sheep. . . because we follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. . . because we offend against God's holy laws... because we leave undone those things which we ought to do and we do those things which we ought not to do . . . because of all of these things, we can pray Psalm 23 as a prayer of thanksgiving, not just for our individual lives but for the whole church: "The Lord is my shepherd, we shall not want."

Here are some interesting thoughts about our Good Shepherd and the difference he can make in our lives:

Following the Good Shepherd all the way to the cross means knowing, not only in our minds but in our very guts, security in the face of danger, joy that crowds out sorrow and love that overwhelms fear. It means being led along paths we would not choose for ourselves. It means being prodded by the shepherd who knows our needs better than we do. Being one of Jesus' flock does not mean that death will not come, that tragedy will not strike, that our hearts will not be broken. It means that whatever befalls us, we may sing this psalm, too: Even though I walk through the corridors of the ICU, I will not fear death... Though I pass through the valleys of depression or delusion, I will not be alone... Though people may taunt me or shun me, I will not lose heart... Though I may sleep in doorways on cardboard boxes, I will fear no evil.... For you anoint me... guard me... love me.... Jesus is the shepherd: he leads us to lives of abundant grace. Jesus is the gate: he places himself between us and all that would destroy our faith and take away our true humanity. Jesus is the lamb: he chose to follow the path that led to death but resulted in life. He submitted himself in order to reveal God's [very] self.³

Savior, like a Shepherd lead us, Much we need thy tender care.

Let us pray: O Jesus, our Good Shepherd, you desire to guide all into safety, refreshment, and peace. Fill us with your love, that we may look into your world with your loving knowledge, welcome our sisters and brothers with your joy, and offer our lives with your generosity as members of your beloved community. Amen.

NOTES

¹Rev. Chris Denny, "Almost Daily Prayer – Passion for God," for April 23 and April 25, 2015 at www.almostdailyprayer.blogspot.com/

²1928 *Book of Common Prayer*.

³Rev. Jennifer Browne, sermon, “But We Are Not Sheep,” March 30, 2014 at www.universitychurchhome.org/sermon-archive/2014/3/30/but-we-are-not-sheep