

## **“The Shepherd’s Hands”**

Liturgical Date: Easter 4 (C); Good Shepherd Sunday, Mother’s Day

Primary Texts: Acts 20:17-35, St. John 10:22-30

Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary texts for today, this Fourth Sunday of Easter known as “Good Shepherd Sunday”, are the First Lesson from Acts 20 and the Gospel Lesson from St. John 10. The title of the sermon is “The Shepherd’s Hands.” OUR GOOD HEAVENLY FATHER HOLDS US SECURE IN HIS STRONG HANDS BY THOSE HE HAS SENT TO US SO THAT WE MAY BE HIS ETERNAL SHEEP.

What believer in Christ doesn’t love the image of the Good Shepherd? Every year on the Fourth Sunday of Easter we hear a portion of Jesus’ Good Shepherd Discourse from St. John 10. This metaphor of a the flock of sheep (which is us, the people of God) being led, protected, cared for, and preserved by a loving and diligent shepherd (who is God) has provided peace and comfort to countless souls over the years. There is a reason the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is so often read, particularly in times of death or distress. When the storms of life come, we don’t feel in control. But we have the Lord’s promise that He is indeed in control and knows what is best for the sheep. As we sang in our Hymn of the Day—a song that many of you have known since childhood, *“He’s got you and me brother, He’s got you and me sister, in His Hands. He’s got the whole*

*world in His hands.*” And God sends people that He puts in positions of authority and leadership to teach, guide, and protect us.

The first person, or group of people, that we want to examine today is pastors. In fact, the word “pastor” derives from the word “shepherd”. So a pastor is literally a shepherd. He is the under-shepherd of God who has been given the responsibility and privilege to carry out the work of God through the Office of the Holy Ministry in the context of a local congregation.

In our First Lesson from Acts 20 St. Paul is speaking to the church at Ephesus as he prepares to depart from them. You can hear Paul’s “heart” for these people in these words. No doubt, there were many that were feeling distress that the one who had brought the Gospel message to them had to leave. What would become of them? But even though God was calling the Apostle Paul to move forth to a new area, there was still ministry that needed to happen in other places and other souls that needed to hear the Gospel, God was not leaving them. The text uses the words “elders” (v17) and “overseers” (v28), which we would call pastors today. He is specifically directing his words to them.

Pastors have a solemn, yet joyful, calling. They publically preach the Word of God and administer the Sacraments. As with St. Paul, *“testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”* (v21) and to *“not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”* (v27) Pastors care for the flock of the Good Shepherd as His representative. They speak the Word of the Lord. They pronounce His words of forgiveness in the stead and by the command, by His authority in the words of the Absolution. They speak

the words of Jesus in the Words of Institution and oversee the distribution of God's grace in His very body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar.

A good shepherd, a good local pastor, works for Jesus and serves the people of the congregation that have been entrusted to his care. And it's not always easy. There can be long hours preparing. Their schedules must be adjustable when a crisis or death occurs. There may be conflicts that arise that must be addressed. But it is a joyful thing to serve the Lord and the people of God.

A shepherd guides and cares for, but also protects. Acts 20 speaks of this, as does Jesus in the Good Shepherd Discourse. Paul is upfront in speaking to the leaders of the church at Ephesus. Verses 30-31, *"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert..."* There are external threats to the Church, but the Scripture is clear and history bears out that the greatest threats to the sheep often arise from those inside the flock. Remember that the ones who worked to have Jesus eliminated were religious leaders! Wolves come disguised as sheep. Pray for pastors as we use discernment to identify those false teachers and teachings that will harm the flock. This is why the pastor sometimes has to say "no" to guard the sheep. We have to sometimes say that not going to do a certain thing, sing a particular song, use a certain Bible Study, or participate in a certain thing because we must hold to the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. A pastor, as the under-shepherd guides, teaches, cares for, and protects.

And this year, Mother's Day coincides with Good Shepherd Sunday. So I join with millions of others today in saying, "Happy Mother's Day!" And I think that it coinciding with Good Shepherd Sunday this year is very appropriate. Because one of God's greatest gifts is motherhood, specifically having a Christian mother.

The second type of people that we want to hear about that God has sent to care for His flock would be mothers. Of course, biology teaches us that to have life, to be conceived and born, one of the essential things you need is a mother! But mothers are much more than agents of biological function to ensure that life continues on the planet. For many people their mother is the person that they can trust, that they can talk to when they feel like no one else will listen and understand. Their mother is the person who cared for them, taxied them around everywhere from practice to recitals to doctor's appointments. Their mother went without expensive clothes and cosmetics to ensure they had not only what they needed, but what they wanted. Mom was there. And the Christian mother is imparting the truth of the Scripture and continually praying for her children and family. While a pastor is there on Sundays, Wednesdays, and at certain key events: Mom is there in the family every day: seeing the good, the bad, and the ugly up close and personal. Self-sacrifice in caring for the sheep is what we see in the example of the Good Shepherd. Mothers help keep us safe in the hands of God.

In fact, there have been many, many songs over the years written in honor of mothers and remembering what they have done. And you all know that my "go to" with songs is often something from country

music. One of my favorite songs about mothers was released in 1992 by the group “Confederate Railroad” (probably couldn’t have that name today!). The song is told from the perspective of a son who had chosen the wrong path earlier in his life, but now as an older and wiser man reflects on the two constant sources of love that had stuck with him through it all:

I made a wish upon a star  
I could have a brand new car  
Got tired of wishing  
So I stole one  
Seventeen and knew it all  
My dreams were big but my thoughts were small  
So many roads somehow I chose  
The wrong one  
But Jesus and mama always loved me  
Even when the devil took control  
Jesus and mama always loved me  
This I know

Yes, mothers love their children even through rebellion, and downright stupidity. Christian moms know how to apply tough love as needed so we can learn and grow. They are the ones’ who say “don’t hang out with that crowd, they are bad news” and “you’ve got another thing coming if you think you are wearing that or going there.” But they keep loving, keep praying that God would work to mold and shape their sons and daughters in His image. But we also must face the fact that some people don’t have good Christian mothers. Maybe one’s mother died in childbirth, when they were a child, and there are mothers who care about themselves more than their children. And even in the case of the best mothers, it is also true that they are not perfect. So God has, in

His wisdom and grace, sent one other Shepherd to us. The good, the best, shepherd of them all.

This is of course, Jesus Christ. While there are cases when pastors have fallen and mothers have failed, this shepherd *always* leads the flock in the right direction. He *always* cares for the sheep. He *always* protects the sheep. He *always* loves the sheep. He *always* does perfectly the will of God the Father. How can this be? We see our answer in the Gospel text from St. John 10. Jesus is asked in verse 24, "*How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ, tell us plainly.*" They get their direct answer as Jesus tells them that no one can pluck His sheep out of His hand nor His Father's hand because as He boldly states in verse 30, "*I and my Father are one.*" Jesus is the Good Shepherd because He is God! True man as well, but every bit true God of power, might, and glory as God the Father. Jesus' opponents certainly understood that this is exactly what Jesus was saying, that He is God, because in the verses that follow they took up stones, wanting to kill Him for blasphemy.

The fact that our Good Shepherd is true man and true God is great news for us sheep! Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world. They follow other sheep, even to their own destruction. They will wander off from the rest of the flock, making them easy prey for wolves. Sheep left to their own devices don't fair so well because they do what sheep do. So it is with us. Due to our sinful nature, we will often make bad decisions. We will follow the wrong crowd or think we can do it on our own. We sin. We rebel against the Good Shepherd. But the Good Shepherd still loves us. In fact as John 10:11 says, "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*" This is exactly what our shepherd, Jesus,

did. As true man He gave His body, blood, and very life for the sins of us wayward sheep on the cross. As true God, He defeated death and stepped out of the grave alive on that first Easter Sunday.

And He is our Good Shepherd to this day. As we will sing to close the Service in the hymn *I Am Jesus' Little Lamb*: "*For my Shepherd greatly guides me, Knows my need and well provides me, Loves me every day the same, Even calls me by my name.*" This reflects what Jesus said in verse 27, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me*" and He said earlier in verse 3 "*The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*" Jesus knows you and calls you by name. Think about how amazing and caring that is. The hymn also says, "*And when my short life is ended, By His angel host attended, He shall fold me to His breast, There within His arms to rest.*" This reflects verses 28-29 when Jesus says no one can pluck His sheep out of His hand, nor the Fathers. Our salvation rests not in our own love and strength, but in that of our Good Shepherd-thanks be to God! God sends people like pastors and mothers to be His servants and do His work among us. But ultimately we are safe in the Good, the Perfect, Shepherd's hands because He holds us there. He's got you and me brother. He's got you and me sister, in His Hands. Living and powerful and eternal hands.

Christ is risen, He is risen indeed! Alleluia.

Amen.