

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of the Easter  
April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024

Pastor Prieue  
Acts 20:28-32

*The Good Shepherd gives good shepherds*

- 1) To watch over his blood-bought flock.
- 2) To build and be built up by the word of grace

Grace and peace to you from Jesus our Good Shepherd, who laid down his life for his sheep. The theme for our whole service today is, “The Risen Savior Provides Good Shepherding.” We saw in our Gospel reading how Jesus described his shepherding, that he lays down his life for his sheep, only to take it up again. I think we’d agree that that kind of sacrifice and commitment to shepherding is truly GOOD. We want to be taken care of by that kind of shepherd!

What is tough for us about living now in the reality of Jesus’ resurrection is that he’s not here right now physically by our side. We have to come to terms with the fact that while the Good Shepherd promised to be with us always to the very end of the age, and he is *spiritually*, we don’t get to put our fingers in his nail-marked hands on the days we’re having doubts. We don’t get to hug him at the end of a bad day. Today, the Good Shepherd rules and reigns at the right hand of God the Father, invisible to us. He is reigning in our hearts through faith, he is guiding us with his word, and he is shepherding us physically through the hands and feet of his body, the Church, believers who have real flesh and blood. One of the ways that takes shape in real life is that you get flawed shepherds like me, and Pastor Raasch and Gawel and Zank, who let’s face it, are an extremely distant second place to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Yet even using flawed people, Jesus has made this a part of his plan for the good of his church.

So in our sermon text from Acts 20, we see Paul take up Jesus’ metaphor of the shepherd and sheep. There we see the truth that God commissions shepherds to serve in his place taking care of his flock. The Apostle Paul is speaking to the elders and leaders in the Ephesian congregation of which he had once served as pastor for three years. He commands them, **“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God.” (Acts 20:28)**. That’s gives us our theme today: *The Good Shepherd gives good shepherds*.

Now studying this shepherd/sheep metaphor for Good Shepherd Sunday has me thinking back to my grade school biology days. It got me thinking about the different kinds of relationship that can happen between two species that interact and depend on each other. Do you remember the biology term

for that? It's called a *symbiotic* relationship, but there's like three different kinds of *symbiotic* relationships. That's about when biology started getting too complicated for me, so I had to look this up again. There's parasitic, commensal, and mutual relationships.

You can hardly say the word parasitic without getting the idea that it's bad. It's like a wood tick or a leech that sucks the blood of its host. One thing prospers while it harms the other. Jesus described in John 10 what a parasitic relationship with sheep looks like. There, he's talking not about *shepherds*, but *hired hands*. **“The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.” (John 10:12,13).**

See what's going on there. The *hire hand* is in it for the money. He only cares about the sheep so long as they're producing wool or milk that are of benefit to his paycheck, but when that wolf shows up, it's “See ya later, alligator!” He's leaching from them the benefit without providing real care or protection in return, and so, he's a harm to the flock. Nobody wants to be taken care of by that, but maybe that's why people wind up not trusting their pastors, which is the Latin word for shepherd, so much anymore. I was reading one of those Gallup Polls that said that in 2023 America, people's trust in pastors or clergy dipped to 32%, a historic low.<sup>1</sup>

Some of that is no doubt the result of parasitic scam artists who swindle sweet old ladies out of their retirement so they can preach in a 10,000 dollar suit and fly around in a private jet. In some cases, they've even got stadiums full of people and TV broadcasts, but their message amounts to nothing more than, “God will solve all your problems if you give me your money.” Or people's distrust of pastors can be the result of big sinful egos, or public scandals, or cover-ups that have been uncovered in the headlines. Or trust can be eroded when even well-intentioned pastors, prone to their sinful natures, succumb to temptation and go astray themselves and fall into sin.

So Paul encourages every shepherd, **“Keep watch over yourselves!”** something shepherds must take to heart constantly, with all of our heart, and you must take it to heart too in the ways you shepherd your families or your friends. If there's something the world hates more than a parasite, it's a hypocrite who doesn't practice what he preaches. So we must watch ourselves and the flock carefully, because the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/poll/608903/ethics-ratings-nearly-professions-down.aspx>

wolves are going to come to devour and destroy both. Paul says, **“I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”** (Acts 20:29,30)

The stakes are high. Wolves are going to distort the truth and turn good into bad and bad into good and the truth into a lie. There is real danger facing the flock on every side. They need protection, someone to guard them and guide them and feed them and steer them away from danger. God provides all those needs through the shepherds he gives to the flock, as Paul told those elders and shepherds in Ephesus, **“The Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”** (Acts 20:28)

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who cared so deeply for you, his flock that he paid the price of his own blood, the most valuable thing in the universe, is not going to leave you unattended and easy prey. If he was that committed to you to lay down his life, then you know that he will send his Holy Spirit upon the church to raise up good shepherds, flawed human beings no doubt, but quite the opposite of the hired hands who only watch out for their own skin. Instead, they give of themselves in the fashion of the Good Shepherd under whom they’re called into service.

You see the way that the Apostle Paul dedicated himself to the task God had given him. He says, **“I know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace.”** (Acts 20:23,24)

And you see how earnestly he had carried his task out among the Ephesians congregation. **“Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.”** (Acts 20:31). Paul had served them as a good under-shepherd of Jesus the Good Shepherd, feeding and nurturing but also warning and correcting them. And still today, you see the way your shepherds here have given themselves to shepherding. Sometimes I think of the fact that two of the shepherds you have here at Mount Olive have given their lives to shepherding for longer than I’ve been alive. That’s not a

wise crack at their age, it's a testimony to their service. Thanks be to the *Good Shepherd who gives good shepherds 1) to watch over his blood-bought flock.*

Now there's another kind of symbiotic relationship called a *commensal* relationship. I'd be surprised if you knew or remember what that one means, but it's basically where one thing benefits and the other is unaffected, both unharmed and unhelped. An example is like a barnacle that attaches to a whale. It's hitching a ride to the place where the food so it can eat, but it doesn't really help or hurt the whale one way or the other. In terms of a shepherd and sheep, you could think of a sheep that kind of tags along on the fringes near the flock where it can eat, but it doesn't really come close enough for the shepherd to be able to call it by name or check it over for wounds. It doesn't get its wool coat sheered off, which is good for the sheep to lighten its load and good for the shepherd to use the wool. Yeah, you could still say it's not really doing any harm, but do you see why that kind of relationship is not really ideal. The sheep out on the fringe is not really providing a benefit to the shepherd or the rest of the flock, and out there it makes an easy target to get nabbed by the wolves. It's still missing the goal which is to have the third kind of symbiotic relationship, a mutual relationship where they are good for each other, where both the shepherd and sheep live together and provide for each other in beautiful blissful harmony.

You know the beauty of this gospel picture from some of the most beloved words of the Bible, the words of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. **“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside the quiet waters, he restores my soul...Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”** (NIV 84). And Jesus expands on that picture in John 10 where he says, **“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me...my sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.** (John 10:14,27, 28).

This is the mutual relationship that Jesus wants you to have with him and with your shepherds here on earth. Paul talks about this in his letter to the Ephesians, the same ones he's been talking to in our sermon text. He tells them, **“Christ himself gave the apostle, the prophets, the evangelist, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be**

**build up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.** (Ephesians 4:11)

The Good Shepherd gives good shepherds to build you up and feed you and equip you for service so that in turn the whole body of Christ may be *built up*. So that the whole body may benefit and reach maturity and the fullness of Christ. Paul points us to what this whole relationship depends on. He says to those shepherds, **“I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”** (Acts 20:32). *The Good Shepherd gives good shepherds 2) to build up and be built up by the word of grace.*

Finally, today I want to close by pointing you to something that for some of you, you may have seen it so often, you don't even see it anymore. It's our Mount Olive Logo which is kind of a picture of how we want this to look. At the top in the first two quadrants, shepherd lead the flock in worship and Bible study so that we're all fed and built up and equipped. Then in turn the sheep serve, using their gifts to benefit others, and share their faith so that more sheep can be brought into the fold to worship and be fed. And the wheel keeps on turning and the family keep on growing deeper in Christ and bigger in number until Jesus returns. Thanks be to God that he has made us a part of the flock and given shepherds to watch over us until that Day. Amen.