

“The Office of Undershepherd”

THE TEXT:

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you, and peace from God ...

The text for today’s message is the Gospel reading from St. John, chapter 10, with the addition of verse 11 where Jesus said, “¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

INTRODUCTION

By my calculations, it’s been right around 850 times that I have stepped into this pulpit since my ordination and installation on July 20th of 2003. After nearly 14 years, I can’t tell you what the future holds, but this is likely my last time in this pulpit to proclaim God’s Word to you. I pray that I have done so faithfully and honestly—and that this congregation knows that the number one job of the Church is to proclaim Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

As you can see, there’s the temptation—and even perhaps the expectation—for a preacher to make his last sermon about himself or what he’s done. You see it all the time: politicians especially like to tell you all the great things they did when they were in office; they practically break their own arms trying to pat themselves on the back.

But there’s also another temptation and that’s for the preacher to make his that last sermon about all the things the congregation needs to do to be a better congregation or to prepare for the next pastor.

I want to resist that temptation. I want to do today what I was called to do from the

beginning—to preach Christ and Him crucified for sinners. My personal theme for my vocation in the ministry has always been First Corinthians 1:23–24, where the apostle Paul says, “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” And so, that’s what I will do today because there’s no power to save in preaching me or preaching you. And my wisdom pales in comparison to God’s wisdom.

The Gospel ministry is all about delivering Jesus to you in Word and Sacrament, in teaching and in preaching, in counseling and in home visits.

TO SHEPHERD HIS PEOPLE IN THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS AND BRING THEM TO ETERNAL LIFE, JESUS INSTITUTED THE OFFICE OF THE HOLY MINISTRY— THE OFFICE OF UNDERSHEPHERD— WHERE JESUS CALLS AND SENDS PASTORS TO FAITHFULLY PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL.

I. Jesus alone is the Good Shepherd.

The Office of Holy Ministry doesn’t belong to the preacher or the pastor—it belongs to Christ. In very much the same way, the Office of President of the United States doesn’t belong to Barack Obama or Donald Trump—it belongs to the people. Donald Trump holds the office right now, but he can’t do whatever he wants with that office of president because it doesn’t belong to him.

While we call holders of the Office of Holy Ministry, pastors, which is Latin for “shepherd,” the Office of Holy Ministry belongs to Jesus—He alone is the Good Shepherd—He alone is the true Shepherd of the sheep. Jesus says in our Gospel reading: “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and

out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. ¹¹I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”

There isn't a single pastor who has lived a perfect life as God commands. And no pastor's death can save you from your sins. No pastor has raised himself from the dead—and no pastor can be the door to Heaven. There's only One Shepherd who did all that for you—Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He alone laid down His life and took it up again for you. Only Jesus has the power to save you from your enemies of sin, death and the devil. And only His voice leads you to His Father in heaven.

II. To Shepherd His Flock, Jesus Calls Undershepherds.

Jesus instituted the Office of Holy Ministry so that you can hear His voice as He shepherds you from the Font of your baptism to your rest in the grave. But Jesus does this good work through means. Just as God cares for your physical life through the means of creation, and He gives you faith in Jesus through the means of grace—Word and Sacrament—so Jesus shepherds His flocks here on earth through the men He calls and places into the Office of Holy Ministry. Thus, pastors are undershepherds of Jesus Christ—they speak for Him.

The vestments that I wear aren't simply religious or ceremonial garb—nor are they there in case I forget to zip or to hide the coffee stain on my shirt—these vestments proclaim that the pastor represents Christ: the stole symbolizes being yoked with Christ in the ministry, and the alb declares that Christ's blood covers my sins as it does yours.

But these vestments also make the pastor invisible to the Gospel he proclaims. The goal of the pastor is that you aren't focused on him—but instead your focus is on Christ in Word and Sacrament. The man is just the vessel Jesus uses to deliver His life and salvation to you. It would

be kind of weird to go to a movie and see the director in every shot, right? He works off-screen, coaching the actors and directing the action, so you can focus on the story. So the pastor diligently works to be invisible to the Lord and Savior He serves.

Another thing about the office of Holy Ministry: no man seeks the office—the office seeks the man. None of the apostles said to Jesus, “I’d make a great apostle.” Jesus sought out and called those men who became His apostles. So it is Jesus who decides who will serve as His undershepherds. And as almighty God, Jesus knows what is best for His congregation—and gives each flock the shepherd it needs. Just think about this for a moment: What if a man named Saul showed up on your call list—and in his PIF you see that see he’s been a persecutor of the church—would you call him to be your pastor? Of course not! But Jesus knows far better about what is good for His Church, than we do—and thus we have the Apostle Paul.

III. Faithfulness

And because the Office doesn’t belong to the undershepherd, but to the Good Shepherd, the apostle Paul regards the number one qualification of pastors to be faithfulness—faithful to Christ in Word and deed—doctrine and practice. Otherwise the pastor isn’t the voice of the Good Shepherd—and you really don’t hear Jesus.

Regarding faithfulness, Paul said to the pastors of the churches of Asia Minor, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:26–28).

Being faithful means that the called servant of Christ doesn’t represent himself, but Christ. He doesn’t preach or teach his own word, but the Word Christ has given him. He doesn’t

shepherd by his own power or will, but by the power of the Gospel. He doesn't shepherd according to his own wisdom—but by the wisdom that is from God.

In times like this, when the Word of God has gone out of season, the temptation is to back off on controversial subjects—to not proclaim the full counsel of God on things like Holy Communion, marriage and sexuality, and even the dangers of sin. But the called Servant of Christ is called to teach faithfully all that Jesus has commanded, so that you always hear the voice of the Good Shepherd.

And pastors don't grow the Church—God the Holy Spirit does for only the Holy Spirit can change hearts. Jesus gives His pastors the means through which the Holy Spirit changes hearts and grows the Church—Word and Sacrament. Thus the pastor, as Christ's undershepherd and representative, is called to be faithful to his Lord and to his flock in Word and Sacrament which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

CONCLUSION

The Church's one foundation isn't the pastor, the culture, money, buildings, or people—it is Christ. When the pastor proclaims the Word of God faithfully, he speaks not with his own voice, but with the voice of the Good Shepherd. And the flock knows to follow that faithful voice, because it is the voice that forgives their sins, and gives them abundant life in Christ.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia!