

**Mark 6:30-34**

A Miami, Florida cemetery is under fire because it is reported to have lost more than 5,000 bodies. The families are in an uproar. They are grieving over the fact that they do not know where the remains of their loved ones are buried. And we sympathize with them. That would be a painful thing to endure.

Much worse, however, would be the grief that would come from not knowing where the soul of a loved one has gone. For where the soul goes the body will eventually follow. But oh how we have turned things around—putting the least important part first, and putting the most important part last! We care more for the body than we care for the soul. We make sure to feed our children three times a day, but the feeding of their soul we neglect. Clean bodies are very important to us, but the cleansing of the soul with the Word of Christ is not very high up on our list.

Is it any wonder that so very many people are wandering through life, as Jesus says, “Like sheep without a shepherd?” They may know where their body is, but their eternal soul is completely lost.

If this describes you or someone that you love, do not despair. Your Good Shepherd loves wandering sheep. He loves you. And He cares for you—both your body and your soul.

Our text tells us that Jesus’ disciples were in need of rest and recuperation. Having returned from a missionary journey Jesus took them to a quiet place where they could relax. But it was not to be. As the saying goes, there is “no rest for the weary.” Many people ran on foot ahead of them, and when Jesus and His disciples got off their boat a crowd was already there waiting for them.

We’re not told what thoughts were on the minds of the disciples, but if they’re anything like us, (and I think they are) they were groaning within themselves. It quickly dawned on them that there would be no relaxing for a while. Jesus had no such thoughts. He always put the needs of others ahead of His own. He felt, not discouragement when He saw the crowd, but compassion...the compassion of a merciful Savior who came to seek and save those who are lost. And they were lost—wandering through life like sheep without a shepherd.

What do sheep do when they have no shepherd? They wander—looking for fresh water and green pastures. And they are never safe from predators. They may survive for a while, but they will eventually perish. Wandering sheep need the care of a shepherd.

Jesus is that Shepherd. And so when He saw the crowd of people, He began to teach them. He opened His mouth and called out to them. As a shepherd calls and gathers his sheep, so Jesus was teaching them to know and recognize His voice to gather them to Himself.

That voice you know. There is a reason why we sing hymns which focus on Christ. There is a reason why we repeat many parts of the liturgy Sunday after Sunday—so that we know and recognize the voice of our Shepherd. It is for that reason also that you are encouraged to open your Bible daily, and to study the Word with the congregation week after week. This is a Lutheran pulpit, and so although you will hear the Law’s judgments condemning you from this pulpit, you will especially hear the voice of your Shepherd. You will know

Him as the One who suffered and died for you. You will hear His word of forgiveness. You will learn of His mercy and love for you.

Since we have such a Shepherd who has gathered us to Himself in Holy Baptism and who feeds us with His Word and Sacrament, why then do you and I so often wander away from Him? Why do we turn our ear away from His voice and listen to the voice of temptation? Why do we refuse to eat from the green pasture He has prepared for us and instead bite and devour each other with our unkind words? It is because we sinful sheep selfishly desire to be sheep without a shepherd. We don't want to be led. We want to lead ourselves through life. We want to be our own shepherd; our own leader; our own god. Our Shepherd calls to us but we ignore His call. Our Shepherd warns us of the predators but we take no heed to His warning.

What is our Shepherd to do with sheep who act as if they have no shepherd? The sheep run away from the Shepherd and leave Him all alone. What does a Shepherd do when He has no sheep? He walks the lonely road to the cross and dies. He dies for His sheep who love to wander.

They all fled in Gethsemane. His disciples left Him all alone. The wolf came and scattered the flock. And they arrested the Shepherd with no sheep. They accused Him and condemned Him. They beat Him and made Him walk the road to Calvary, and there your Shepherd died. He died for you...His wandering sheep.

But He did not stay in the grave. He rose again. He rose to call you back to Himself. He rose from the dead to forgive you for wandering away from Him. He lives for you. For though you and I often live as sheep without a shepherd, He has compassion on you. He who went to the cross alone will not leave you to wander through life alone. He forgives your sins and draws you to Himself through that Word of Life. He does not punish you for straying from Him. He who died for you has already borne your punishment. You are fully forgiven.

Because you are baptized you are a sheep who belongs to the Shepherd. There is no need for you to wander away from Him. There is no reason for you to forsake His call to you. Your Shepherd leads you in the way of life—His life for you. Your Shepherd gives only that which is good to you. How long has it been since you have freely drunk and eaten at the Table of salvation which He prepares for you? Here He gives Himself to you, not to condemn, but to forgive; to strengthen; to draw you to Himself in faith so that you remain always close to Him.

Jesus did not die for you so that you would follow the voice of temptation. Jesus does not forgive you so that you can go your own sinful way through life. Dear members of Christ Lutheran congregation, it is very true that all we like sheep have gone astray. But now your Shepherd is here—here in bread and wine for you; here in His strong Word—and He claims you as His own. The time for wandering is over. Jesus is here in Word and Sacrament to lead us through life. The time for sinful living is past. Jesus forgives your selfishness and calls you to follow Him.

And when your family lays your body into a grave one day, do you realize what hope they will have—what joyful confidence God will give them...as they give thanks to God

for what He has done for them, in giving a Shepherd to suffer, die, and rise again for His sinful sheep? And for giving you to your Shepherd in Holy Baptism and through His word of forgiveness and His precious body and blood, keeping you always with your Shepherd?

And so no matter what happens to your earthly remains, your family will rejoice that Jesus has your eternal soul. For where the soul is, the body will one day follow.

Friends, how good it is for us not to be wanderers any longer, but to be gathered together as sheep for our Good Shepherd. And this is who you are, because your Shepherd always has compassion on sheep who love to wander. Amen.