

Lectionary 16 Eighth Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
July 18, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning's readings are like a mini "Good Shepherd Sunday", like we usually get each year during the season of Easter. Three of our readings today deal with shepherds—we read the 23rd Psalm, the reading from Jeremiah mentions bad shepherds who scatter God's flock, and our gospel this morning says that Jesus had compassion on the people because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

Now, I know only a bit about sheep, but one thing I'm familiar with is how easily they scatter. One summer in college, Mason worked at a Lutheran camp not far from my home. He worked as the naturalist, and was charged with the care of a small barn of animals. The barn was very near a rural highway, and while normal traffic wouldn't usually scare his flock of 2 sheep, big 18 wheelers, loud tractors from other farms, and the occasional motorcycle would send one sheep off in one direction and the other off in a different direction. They were contained in a barnyard so there was only so far that they could go, but every time, they would split and run in opposite directions.

From this experience, plus some other stories I've heard, I've never found the comparison of Christians with sheep particularly flattering. And yet, when it comes to scattering, it seems to be quite fitting. We've learned quite a bit about scattering this past year and a half because of the pandemic. We've spent a lot of time physically scattered and distanced from one another. Places are starting to open up now, and with the rollout of safe, effective vaccines, things are beginning to return to normal. But we're not out of the woods yet. We're hearing now of a potentially deadly new variant lurking and we may fear that we will need to scatter all over again.

This physical scattering, the physical distance we've observed to curb the spread of the virus took its toll on many of us. Loneliness, depression, strained or dissolving relationships, increases in substance abuse, renewed anxiety, and being physically scattered had real consequences. But this isn't the only way we scatter.

We seem to be very good at dividing ourselves. We scatter into different groups and ideologies, political parties and denominations. Maybe our scattering has something to do with the false shepherds Jeremiah is talking about. They're often powerful and influential political, cultural, and religious figures who promise to fix the brokenness in our lives and our world. Their answer, however, always seems to be to separate ourselves from people who are different from us. They tell us to scatter away from people who look different, act differently, talk differently, believe differently, and live differently than we do. But for all our scattering as we follow these false shepherds, we never find peace. The brokenness in our lives and in our world continues, no matter how far we scatter away and divide ourselves from other people.

This was a lot of what the Apostle Paul was dealing with in his life and ministry. The reading from Ephesians this morning encapsulates it perfectly. There are two groups of Christians in the city. The first group converted from Judaism and were circumcised. They believed that you had to be Jewish before you could be Christian. On the other side, there was a group who converted from being Pagan. They believed that you had to reject Judaism and all other creeds before you could become Christian. This disagreement is a theme that comes up a lot in Paul's churches and in his letters to them. In all cases, the work of the church wasn't

getting done. And much as we might like to believe otherwise, these kinds of divisions haven't gone away in the 2,000 years since Paul wrote his letters.

There are similar stories of divisions between Christians today. There is a city, it could be anywhere in the United States, that had two churches of different denominations together on the same block. These churches saw a real need for hunger and homeless ministry in their city, and so they started to talk about joining forces and resources to tackle these issues. As they were planning, they needed to do fundraising. So, each church started talking to their parent denominations, asking after funding for ministries like these. One of the bishops of one of the denominations was thrilled at the new ministry, but didn't think his church should work so closely with "those *other* Christians". That congregation had to pull out of the planned ministry, and without their support and funds, the plans for ministry fell apart. They never did feed or shelter even one person.

This is what it looks like to scatter, or to be scattered. We find ourselves making idols and ideologies, loving rules and personal identities more than Jesus. We might like to think that we're the ones who have it right, and that others are scattering away from us—but even then, we run the risk of becoming more enamored with our "rightness" than we are with Jesus, and then we become just like one of the factions in Paul's letters. We still find ourselves scattered and divided, just like sheep.

But here's the thing about sheep, even though they scatter, they want to be together. Even the little flock of two sheep wanted to be together and near each other all the time. So, when a noise from the road came, or something else scattered them, they would whine and cry until they were together again. Now, of course, they also aren't very smart. So, if in the course of scattering, one of them entered the barn, or went around a corner in such a way that they couldn't see each other, they would just stand there whining and crying separated and scattered. It went on this way until the shepherd finally called them. Until the shepherd drew one back to the other.

Now, it's true that a college kid from the city didn't make the greatest shepherd at a rural camp. My husband was not a particularly good shepherd. But Jesus is our Good Shepherd. Our Gospel this morning starts with Jesus gathering his disciples in from the far off places that they have been working and ministering. When he sees a crowd of people like sheep without a shepherd, he has compassion on them. He teaches them, and while it's skipped in our reading this morning, he feeds them. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who fulfills the promises from the prophet Jeremiah, that "all people would be gathered from the far-off places that we have scattered to so that Judah can be saved and Israel can live in safety".

Christ is our Good Shepherd who unites the church into one body in himself. Christ is the shepherd who brings us together across denominations to work for justice and peace. In a little over a month, we will gather with other churches, across many church denominations, for "Loaves and Fishes," A day-long event where the hungry and poor are cared for with food, household goods, school supplies, and other necessities of life. This is what it looks like to be gathered by Christ. And when we are gathered by Christ, and made one with people who are not like us in the church, the brokenness of our world begins to mend, and the brokenness in ourselves starts to heal. Christ is our Good Shepherd. Christ continually works to gather us together, ending our division and healing our brokenness. And ultimately, Christ lays down his life for us as he is lifted high upon the cross, and in that act of love, Christ gathers all people, the whole flock, to himself. Thanks be to God. Amen.