

# “Misericordia Domini”

‘Good Shepherd Sunday’

John 10:7-16 Psalm 23  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For centuries, this particular Sunday of the Easter season has been known by the title of today's sermon – *Misericordia Domini*. Have any idea what it means? Those of you with a Catholic background, or those who have had some Latin may have a clue. “Domini” is the word for Sunday. “Misericordia” means the “goodness of the Lord.” So literally, this is “The Goodness of the Lord Sunday.” But it officially goes by another name, however. You may be able to guess from the imagery presented in this morning's Scripture readings, or by looking at the artwork on the cover of the worship bulletin.

Yes, this is “Good Shepherd Sunday.” Since ancient times, the Western church has used this occasion during the fifty days of the Easter Season (the time between Easter Sunday and the Day of Pentecost) to invite congregations to encounter the risen Christ as the Good Shepherd – the Shepherd who is calling us by name and leading us into abundant life.

**The shepherd metaphor is deeply woven into the language and the imagery of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.** In the Old Testament, God is often pictured as a Shepherd, and the Hebrew people as God's flock.

The most familiar example, of course, comes from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters” (KJV). These words have served as a source of comfort for thousands of years.

But there are several other references in the Old Testament, especially in other Psalms. From Psalm 79: “We your people and sheep of your pasture will give you thanks for ever.” From Psalm 95: “We are the people of God's pasture, and the sheep of God's hand.” A reference to the coming Messiah in Isaiah 40 declares, “He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are young.”

In addition to God, the leaders of the Hebrew people are also sometimes described as shepherds of God's flock. Before David became king, he actually was a shepherd. This may have served as the source of inspiration for using this image.

Yet, most references to humans as shepherds come as words of warning. From the prophet Jeremiah: “Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture.” Ezekiel has a tremendous indictment of the false

leaders who seek their own good rather than the well-being of the flock. “Woe be unto the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?”

These words are still applicable today in reference to certain church leaders who hold their own personal interests and ambitions over those of the congregations they are called to serve. I’ll speak more on this in a moment.

The shepherd imagery was carried over into the New Testament. The author of the Gospel of John, writing some 60-70 years after the death of Jesus, transferred this imagery, calling Jesus the Good Shepherd. The Greek word used for “good,” *kalos*, also has the meaning of “model” or “true.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus is also pictured, then, as the model shepherd, the true shepherd.

And just as the Old Testament used shepherd imagery concerning the leaders of the Hebrew people, New Testament biblical writers also envisioned the leaders of the Christian Church as shepherds, and the people in congregations as the flock. **Did you know that the very word ‘pastor’ is from the Latin word for ‘shepherd’?**

In the New Testament book of 1 Peter, it states that it is the duty of church leaders: to feed the flock of God, to accept the oversight willingly and not by constraint, to do it eagerly and not for love of money, not to use the position for the exercise of power, and to be an example to the flock.

So, while being an ordained pastor, elder, or deacon in the Presbyterian Church comes with a certain inherent authority, **we must constantly remind ourselves that those of us who are church leaders are called to a specific function and purpose, not to an authoritarian position of power and control over others.**

**Authority, yes; authoritarian, no. They are two very different things.** The way the difference was described to us in seminary is that authority is born out of responsibility, while authoritarian power is born out of a selfish desire to control others – something that I believe is all too-common.

**Let us all be mindful then, to take whatever authority we are given seriously, but not to abuse our power. I think this applies to governments as well as to the church.**

While the biblical image of a shepherd is used to refer specifically to church leaders, I now believe it has even broader implications. I envision each and every member of this congregation also fitting into the role of shepherding one another. That’s a part of fulfilling our baptismal vows. **For as shepherds, we are called to nurture and look after the well-being of one another. Not in a rescuer, co-dependant sort of way, but out of genuine care and compassion for each other.** That is how we define the term “agape” love.

**And we must continue to look for ways, as a congregation, to act as shepherds to this neighborhood community around us.** So a question ever before us is: How can we, as a congregation, lead others to “green pastures?” How can we nourish others? And not only spiritually, but also with their physical and emotional needs as well. I know that the Outreach and Ministry Committee

particularly focuses on these issues, but it is a responsibility we each bear in our calling to faithful discipleship.

Our ability to take our role as shepherd seriously reflects, to some extent, our relationship and understanding of the Good Shepherd. Using the Scriptures as a guide, **the image of a shepherd should paint for us a picture of the unceasing watchfulness, patience and love of God.**

When you think of the duties and responsibilities of a shepherd, what comes to mind? I think primarily of the tasks of **guiding, gathering, feeding and protecting**. That is what God and Christ do for us through the Holy Spirit. By extension, with God's help, it can be expected of church leaders as well. As Ministers of Word and Sacrament, for instance, pastors do indeed have a responsibility to help guide and nurture the congregation in matters of life and faith. At the very least, hopefully the pastor won't lead the flock astray.

I especially like the image of a shepherd guiding the flock to green pastures, where the sheep can feed and find comfort and rest. Hopefully that happens every Sunday when we gather to worship God. This really emphasizes the pastoral side of our many-faceted role as church members and leaders. **It is often through our pastoral efforts towards and with one another that God works to bring comfort and rest.**

I also like the image of a shepherd gathering the sheep together. While it is true that each one of us made a conscious decision to come to church this morning (well, some of you may have been dragged here against your will), **it is the call of God and Christ that actually gathers us.** I've often wondered why else would people choose to gather week in and week out?

It is appropriate, then, especially during this Easter season, that we recognize the voice and life-giving presence of the Good Shepherd. One biblical commentator writes, **"The purpose of Christ serving as a shepherd is to bring us to life by bringing us to God."** As the Good Shepherd, then and now, Christ provides for the health, the well-being (i.e. salvation) of the sheep. In fact, John 10:10 is perhaps one of the best proclamation of the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry: **"I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."** So let me close by asking:

- **Are you experiencing abundant life?**
- **Are we, as a church, living our congregational life to it's fullest?**
- **Could we experience our life together more abundantly?**
- **If so, how?**
- **How can we more deeply experience God's loving, nurturing and guiding presence?**

These are the questions that this image of God and Jesus as the Good Shepherd ask us to reflect upon, and then for which we must respond. Amen.