

Acts 20:28-32 + Compassion for the Flock<sup>1</sup> + Series: Jesus Lives! So What?  
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 4th Sunday of Easter + 22 April 2018

CIR HIRI!<sup>2</sup>

How do you know you're loved? Love is a basic human need. Love is something we have all needed from the day we were born. We yearn for love from little on. Multiple studies have shown that if a child receives ample attentive love starting as a newborn, that child has a much higher chance at developing good behavioral, emotional, and social health. Mothers are encouraged to hold their newborn skin-to-skin right after birth to kick start the child's development, but the need for love doesn't stop at birth. It continues through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and all through adulthood.

Everyone needs love, but how do you know you're loved? How do you know you're actually receiving the love you need? To a certain extent, you just know. The genuine love of a spouse, of your kids or grandkids or nieces or nephews, of friends—you just know! Yet so often, to paraphrase an old country song, we look for love in all the wrong places. Is your need for love filled by the affection and intimacy of anyone who shows affection—even if they don't love you? Is your need for love filled by the praises of others around you? Is your need for love filled by images or videos on a screen? Is your need for love filled by working harder or accomplishing more than others?

In time, such attempts to fill your need for love prove empty and unfulfilling. What follows? Pain. Loss. Heartache. Difficulty trusting others. Confused views on God-pleasing forms of love. A tendency to view others as objects to be used rather than as people whom God created. So where can we find love that is not selfish, that is not self-serving, that looks outside of itself with truly self-sacrificing compassion? How can we know that we are truly loved?

This morning the Apostle Paul directs our yearning hearts to the Good Shepherd, who truly loves us, but how does he do that? How does the Good Shepherd demonstrate that **COMPASSION FOR THE FLOCK**? How do you know that the Good Shepherd loves you?

Well, how would God appraise you? What would God say your natural value is? ***"All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."*** (Romans 3:12) Whoa! ***"Worthless"***? That's pretty harsh. That means no worth, no importance, no value. By nature, we're all like cheap knock-offs compared to the genuine article.

Why would God say that? Why would God say that our natural value is ***"worthless"***? Didn't he create all of us? Yes, he did, but what happens if you take a bottle of the finest, most expensive wine, and you inject poison into it. It becomes worthless. You see like poison, sin corrupted each and every one of us at the moment our lives began. Sin has ruined every one of us and everything good in us. We have to confess with King David, ***"Surely I was sinful at birth; sinful from the time my mother conceived me."*** (Psalm 51:5) Is it any surprise, then, that we are ***"worthless"*** in God's sight, deserving only to be thrown away from him forever?

Yet in spite of who you are, in spite of who I am, the Good Shepherd still loves us, but how do you know? Listen to Paul's farewell message to the Ephesian elders—the pastors, you could say, of the congregations based in and around the city of Ephesus. Listen to how Paul describes the people they serve. ***"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers/guardians, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood."***

Did you catch how much the Good Shepherd loves you? Paul describes you as God's ***"flock,"*** as ***"the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood"***! Being called God's ***"flock"*** isn't a criticism, but it does speak quite honestly about who we are. You see, sheep are naturally dumb. In fact, in Jesus' day, a sheep was nothing more than a "forward-moving thing." Sheep eat. They bleat, and they move forward to repeat. Sheep are helpless. They can't protect themselves. In fact, sheep often need protection from themselves! They have been known to crush each other if they huddle too closely in their pen. If a sheep stumbles and rolls on its back, it can't turn itself over. It needs help or it will die. They easily wander and can get hopelessly lost even within sight of the flock. So it's quite humbling when God's Word describes us as sheep.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the thoughts for this sermon were received from the homiletical work of Rev. Gregg Bitter (1969-2016).

<sup>2</sup> "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" This is known as the *Paschal Greeting*, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, "Christ is risen!", they respond loudly and boldly, "He is risen indeed!"

Yet in spite of that, the Good Shepherd still loves us! In fact, the Good Shepherd loves us more than any shepherd who ever loved his flock. Jesus purchased **“the church of God,”** his flock at an impossibly high price. We were **“purchased with his own blood.”** Think about that!

Consider the price that Jesus paid for you! If you can't quite grasp it, consider what the Apostle Peter wrote, **“For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...”** Christ did not purchase you with gold or silver or stocks or real estate, but with his holy, precious blood. Jesus sacrificed himself for sheep who loved to stray. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep, for you, for me, for all the church of God. Jesus died to purchase you to be his own, even when you were worthless in your sin. Why? The Good Shepherd loves you!

So if the Good Shepherd has purchased you at such a high cost to himself, if he has made you priceless when you were worthless, if he values you so much, then surely the Good Shepherd wants to protect you and the rest of his flock. The world's most valuable treasures are kept behind elaborate security systems that are regularly upgraded to ward off thieves or anyone who might do harm to a priceless treasure. The Lord doesn't have an elaborate computerized security system to protect his flock, but he does provide his flock with shepherds—trained, qualified, faithful, yet also human.

You see, constantly circling around God's flock are hungry, bloodthirsty wolves—Satan, sin, false teachers, death. They want to separate you from the Good Shepherd's flock. They want you to wander. In fact, what they want most is for the shepherds to stop paying attention, to get lazy or distracted. Those wolves want the shepherds to take the flock down a wrong path that leads to their hungry jaws. If the shepherds fail, the flock suffers. If the shepherds stop being vigilant in any way, if they let a gap open, the wolves rush in and destroy. That's the last thing that the Good Shepherd wants to happen to his beloved flock.

So the Good Shepherd provides his flock with shepherds to be constantly vigilant for his flock. You can hear that concern in Paul's words to the Ephesian elders. **“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as guardians, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.”** The Good Shepherd provides his flock with shepherds to watch over the flock—and themselves. How? Through time spent with the Good Shepherd in his Word. Through time spent personally and devotionally studying God's Word. Through time spent with God's flock studying God's Word and practically applying it to everyday issues and challenges.

If a pastor or leader in the church is not in the Word of God, he cannot protect his flock from savage and subtle false teachers. If you are not in the Word, how can you be sure that I or any other shepherd is leading you on the right path to heaven? How can you withstand the attacks of savage wolves in your midst or when times get difficult? The Good Shepherd provides faithful shepherds to guard and care for you and the rest of his flock with his Word. Why?

The Good Shepherd loves you and wants his shepherds to love you as he has loved you. The Good Shepherd wants his shepherds to love his flock with a love that cares for the eternal future of every soul in his flock, a love that wants to see every one of your souls in heaven someday. That love moved the Good Shepherd to lay down his life to purchase you with his blood. That love enables your pastor to keep watch over himself and his flock, to feed you with the gospel, and care for every one of you until the Good Shepherd calls you home.

The Good Shepherd purchased you with his blood and provides you with shepherds, but he also prepares his flock with his Word. Paul told the Ephesian elders, **“And now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all who are sanctified.”** The Good Shepherd shepherds his people with his Word of grace. As we heard, the Good Shepherd protects his flock when his shepherds and his flock are in the Word. That Word of God also prepares us by building us up in the present so we can look ahead to the future, to the eternal inheritance of all made holy in the blood of Christ.

How does God's Word of grace build us up in the present? The Word builds us up in knowledge and understanding so we can recognize the wolves and their attacks. The Word builds us up in faith so we can stand firm on that Word no matter how savage the attacks. That Word builds us up so we can keep following the Good Shepherd through the darkest valleys of life.

God's Word of grace then builds us up in hope so we remain faithful to the end. That Word fixes our eyes on Jesus, so we don't grow weary and lose heart, so we don't lose hope no matter how great our present sufferings might be. That Word points us to the eternal inheritance that awaits all of us who have been made holy in the precious blood of Christ, all of us who have been reborn to eternal life through the water and Word of Baptism.

So how do you know that the Good Shepherd loves you? He purchased you with his blood laying down his life for you and taking that life back up again. He provides you with shepherds, and he prepares you with his Word of grace. Are you loved? Yes, you are loved by the Good Shepherd. **CIR HIRI!** Amen.