

There it is. Right there in the words of our Lord you have the best and most concise definition of what it is that a shepherd, a good shepherd, does. Jesus is the Good Shepherd; He gives His life for the sheep.

In the original Greek, the word that Jesus uses to describe Himself is *kalos*, which means “good, true, beautiful, perfect.” That is exactly what Jesus said; and that’s exactly what the Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd does; He does something that no other shepherd will ever think of doing – He gives His life for the sheep, His sheep. He gives His life for you, dear sheep.

In our text Jesus makes a clear distinction between Himself and other “shepherds” whom He calls “hirelings.” Hirelings, of course, are those are hired to do certain tasks and fired when they do not perform them. That is not how the church works; that is how the business world works. Hirelings are there just to get a paycheck, and not necessarily because they want to be there. The motivation for a hireling is not to guard, not to protect, not to take care of the sheep, even at the risk of his own life. No, a hireling does only what he has to do to get a paycheck. He has no vested interest in the sheep. It is as Jesus said: ***“The hireling...does not care for the sheep.”***

Jesus makes another distinction between Himself and the hirelings. The hirelings do not own the sheep. If you do not own something, you will

care little about it. Who worries all that much about what does not belong to him? If you do not own something, why go out of your way to protect and defend it? Why get all worked up about something that does not belong to you? That is a hireling; there is no ownership; he does not care.

But that is NOT Jesus. He is the Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd. The difference between Jesus and the hirelings is that He owns the sheep, they belong to Him. Jesus owns you, you who are baptized and redeemed, because He bought you with the price of His own blood shed on the cross. He calls you His own through Holy Baptism; He made you and bought you to be a part of His fold here at Zion. Through Baptism you belong to Him, you belong to Jesus, who paid for all your sins by suffering and dying for you and in your place. You, dear sheep, belong to Jesus, the Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd who paid the ultimate sacrifice of His own life to save your woolly hide.

You are the Barabbas of the Passion account. You are guilty of all your sins. You deserve to die not only physically but also eternally because of your sinful nature. You are rightly condemned by God for your sins and disobedience. You should have been on the cross instead of Jesus, for by nature you are blind, dead, enemies of God.

But no. Jesus took your place. Jesus, the Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd went to the cross instead of you. He, the perfect, sinless Son of God died the death that you, the fully sinful person, the wandering sheep, deserved. He took all your sins, all your wretchedness, all your self-centeredness, all your guilt. He received it all to Himself in His body on the tree of the cross. He, the sinless and perfect God in the flesh suffered and died for you. And you, the one who deserves to die eternally, you get to go free. He takes your sin, and in exchange you get His free forgiveness and pardon and life. That is how Jesus owns you. That is how Jesus bought you.

And since He owns you, He promises never to go back on His Word, especially the word which says, ***“I will never leave you nor forsake you”*** (Heb 13:5). Jesus has made certain that His Word to you will not fail. That is why He sends you someone to take care of you in His place, in His stead, and by His command. He sends your pastor, a man who is under orders by God to take care of you by giving you Jesus.

Jesus, the Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd sends His pastors, His under-shepherds, into His church to do His work for His sheep who are in the church. The work of a shepherd is to guide, protect, defend and feed

his sheep at all costs with the best that Jesus has to offer. Any pastor who does anything less is not fit to be a pastor.

Unfortunately, there are many hirelings who only play the part of pastor. These are men whom Jesus calls elsewhere in Scripture “**wolves in sheep’s clothing**” (Mt 7:15). These pastors are only hirelings.

Hirelings, those who do not care for the sheep, allow their sheep to hear less-than-faithful preaching. The kind of preaching that tells the sheep to take care of their own problems and look somewhere other than Jesus for peace, safety, and protection; the kind of preaching that does not point the sheep to the cross of Christ; the kind of preaching that gives the sheep 10 steps to a better walk with God, 40 days of purpose, and any number of other approaches that are not faithful to God’s Word and have no basis in true preaching and faithful administration of the Sacraments. These hirelings do not do the hard work of teaching and preaching and giving what Jesus wants to be taught and preached and given. They compromise the Word of God, and thus compromise the integrity of the congregation, the sheepfold they are called to serve.

Hirelings water down the teaching and practice of the Lord’s Supper. They teach that it is OK to use grape juice or non-alcoholic wine in place of what our Lord commanded in His Word or to attend virtually even if you are

capable of coming. Those who do that are unfaithful, and they are lazy, and they are destructive. They introduce doubt and uncertainty into the Sacrament of the Altar where it ought never to be! These hirelings weaken when someone criticizes the church's teaching and practice of faithful distribution of the Supper of our Lord; they allow any and all sheep to eat and drink to their judgment and to make a false witness. Therefore, they abuse the sheep, the very sheep for whom Christ died. And by so doing they call Jesus a liar and dismiss and despise His Word.

Hirelings point the sheep to their own feelings and emotions and works. They let the sheep graze in grasses that only look like the real thing when in fact those grasses are not only not helpful, but are poisonous and deadly.

Hirelings do not preach and teach the biblical fact that Christ always and only works through His chosen means. They fail to make it clear that forgiveness and salvation – and therefore the only real and lasting peace and comfort and strength – comes only through the Gospel rightly preached, and the Sacraments of Baptism, Absolution, and Supper rightly administered. Forgiveness and salvation do not come through what the sheep do; those things come only through and because of what the Good/

True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd has done and continues to do and deliver in His Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect gifts.

When our Lord Jesus Christ says that He is “***the Good Shepherd***,” He acts in a completely unexpected way, not like our human ideas about shepherds. Thanks be to God our Good Shepherd does not act like we would expect Him to act; thanks be to God that His ways are not our ways. Instead of using the sheep for His own benefit, He lays down His life for the sheep. And in this we see what makes Him truly good. He is good because He fulfills His Father’s will.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, is the ram caught in the thicket who provides His own blood for our doorposts in order that the angel of death may pass over us. He is the One who stands between us and our judgement; He is the One who has taken our place in hell so that we go free. He is our Mediator, our Intercessor, our Champion, our Captain. He is our true Brother; He is flesh of our flesh and bone of our bones.

Christ, our Good Shepherd is the One descended from David and Abraham, and yet, mysteriously, incomprehensible at the same time. He is true God who is without beginning and without end; He is the One through whom all things were made. He is our salvation; He is our peace; He is our

hope and our joy. He is our Good Shepherd, the One who feeds us with His own body and blood in order that we, His sheep, may live.

The word “Good” in the title Good Shepherd reminds us of the “Good” of Good Friday. For there we see exactly how and to what extent our Good Shepherd gave up His life for us His sheep. There the suffering and death and sacrifice was the cruelest and most harsh. There we see the full extent of the horror of our sins such that this true God and Man was literally abandoned and damned for all the sheep. It is exactly what had to happen, yes, it is the only possible way that our sins could be paid for in full, that Jesus our Good Shepherd was literally thrown to the wolves in our place. He was beaten, mauled, and killed in order to save us, His sheep, from certain eternal death.

Of course, the good Shepherd did not only lay down His life for the sheep, but He also took up His life again. And because He has taken up His life, death is dead. Life lives.

And the voice of our Good Shepherd continues to be heard and received in His holy Word and Sacraments, the very things by and through which He continues even today to feed and sustain His sheep. His voice still calls to us in the waters of Holy Baptism wherein we receive His name and Spirit and salvation and forgiveness and life. His voice still calls to us

through His real, physical body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar through which He delivers not just assurance of sins forgiven, but actual forgiveness of sins – the real thing through the real body and the real blood of Christ. Through these things our Good Shepherd continues to feed and care for His sheep, sheep which need all the care and nurture the Good Shepherd has to give.

There are, of course, competing voices among the sheep. There are the voices that would unite us again to cry with one voice, **“Crucify Him.”** These are the voices that tempt us to turn away from the voice of our Good Shepherd and toward our own ways, to seek shepherds who will act like shepherds should, in predictable and reasonable ways. There is the voice that echoes across time from the Garden suggesting, **“Did God really say...?”** And there is the voice of our fallen nature which would not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. That is the rebel voice inside of us who would still decide for himself what is pleasing to the eye and good for food.

And, not surprisingly, all those voices claim to be THE Voice. Even though we know they are not the voice of our Good Shepherd, again and again we find ourselves following them, listening to them, even seeking them out. Again and again we have followed like tired, dirty, hungry sheep

and have walked right past the cleansing waters and the good food the Good Shepherd gives us and has laid out for us and have settled for that which does not and cannot satisfy. We have stood in judgment over God and have condemned Him with our words and actions. We have declared to Him what we believe is wise and what we will put up with. We have declared to Him what He must do and how He must be if we would honor Him with our worship and love. All of which proves even more profoundly that sheep need a shepherd, for they cannot lead, feed, or save themselves.

Hear the voice of your Good Shepherd. ***“I am the Good Shepherd. The Good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But he who is a hireling and not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.”***

That is the true voice and work and love of your Good Shepherd. Christ is the Good Shepherd. He has already laid down His life for you. He has already delivered you from all wolves, even other false voices and false shepherds.

And here today He has provided the green pastures and still waters of His love and forgiveness in His Holy Supper. Here today He continues to feed you with His Word of forgiveness, and His real and actual body and blood for forgiveness, life, and salvation. Here in His Supper is His life, His love, His care, His heavenly nourishment. Here the true benefits of His love are delivered for sure. Here is where what we pray for when we pray **“Give us this day our daily bread...and forgive us our trespasses”** is delivered for sure.

Hear again your Lord’s words to you: **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep.”** That is what Jesus does and continues to do here in this place through the Office of the Holy Ministry. His life is what Jesus delivers to you each and every time you hear His Gospel, His sacrificial suffering and death and resurrection for you. His life is what You receive as you recall daily your Baptism. His life is what you receive when the Absolution is spoken into your ears. His life is what you receive in His body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar.

May you always be open and obedient to the leading, guiding, feeding and protecting that our Good/True/Beautiful/Perfect Shepherd freely gives.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit.