

**Sunday April 30, 2023**  
**Good Shepherd Sunday**  
by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! It is my final Sunday here at Christ Lutheran Church. I am both exhilarated to go on to what is next and very sad to be leaving you. This is both a happy and sad day for me, and for you too. We've walked a long way together in the past two years, and I know that you and I will both keep walking, moving forward slowly but surely along the path God is calling us to. Please continue to pray for me in the days to come, as I will be praying for you.

I've given a lot of thought about what I might say to you all this Sunday. You, my internship congregation, you my fellow members of the quilting guild, to internship committee, to those who could not be here today, to you my friends and family members who are visiting today, and to those who may be watching from home.

In some ways, as a preacher, I am always constrained by the lectionary readings each week. This is the set schedule of what we read in church every Sunday and these are the readings I have to interpret, wrestle, and preach with. Today is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday. We as Christians proclaim in Psalm 23, borrowed from ancient Hebrew writers, that Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Like the jingle from the State Farm ads on TV, *Like a Good Shepherd, Jesus is there!*

In a similar way, John's gospel tells us all about gates today. Jesus is both the gate and also the shepherd passing through the gate to the flock in this parable.

There have always been gatekeepers. There have always been people in the church who have sought to keep some people in and keep others out. We all know a version of this story. Some of us here today have been shut out because we didn't believe something we were told we had to or were told to stop asking questions. Some of us here have been shut out because we didn't look, speak, or act like all the other sheep. And some of us here today, at some point in the past have been locked out of the grassy field for reasons we may never know or understand. Whatever the reason, our wounds ran deep. We bear scars. When we finger them, we can still feel the ache.

Our wounded hearts harden. Our broken hearts mend crooked. Yet, life goes on. Our lungs are still breathing in the air. Our hearts continue to beat. Some of us turn our backs on the shepherd and the sheep, others do their best to forget about it and wander to new pastures, and some of us continue to stand in sight of the gate hoping to be let back in. I've done all three.

In my life as a Christian, I have done all of these. As a member of the LGBTQ community, I have been told subtly and directly—here's the gate, get out. I've been told all that life-giving grass I see others eating is for good God's people, but not for people like me. Not for sinners. Not for deviants. Not for those who have turned their back on God.

Being a queer person has often meant I have not been welcome in Christian spaces. Has meant I have been shunned by religious people. Have faced protests, name-calling, and threats by people who say they follow Jesus.

In some Christian spaces, when I did choose to stay, I was asked to remain in the closet, to pretend to be someone I was not, and to keep my head down. Don't make waves, I was told. If you want to worship Jesus with us, then you need to lie about who you are.

So I left. I turned my back on Christianity for a long time. Every time I came back in the next decade to take the temperature in the room, to see if there might be a place for me at the table, the answer was the same. Nicer maybe—in that great way that people smile at you when you have said something they hate. That I am sucking on a lemon, but am going to pretend I am not sucking on a lemon sort of smile, you know the one I mean. Some of you might be smiling like that right now. Nothing had changed. I longed to belong to a community of faith, without having to be anything but myself. Without apology. So often in my search for a beloved community, it was the church who was the dark valley, it was the church who was more like the shadow of death.

I wanted a good shepherd. I needed a good shepherd. And even though there have always been shepherds, very few had the courage, the compassion, the naivete or the stubbornness to include me in their flock as a sheep among sheep. As a beloved child of God who wanted to join their siblings giving thanks and praise to the one who had created us all.

I could trust in God all I wanted, but how long would I have to wait until I found a good shepherd? A good flock.

I have had such a long journey to be with you all here today. It has taken two years of seminary and internship to get here. It has taken four years to complete the process for the Candidacy Committee and the Bishop's office to approve me for ministry. It has taken years for me, more than a decade of wrestling with the idea that God might be calling me to be a pastor. More than a dozen years wondering how God could be calling me into the pasture where up until very recently, I was not allowed to be ordained as an LGBTQ person, let alone married to my husband. Who was I to even think there might be room for me, that God could be calling me to be a shepherd of a flock?

Saying yes to God's call in my life hasn't been easy. But saying yes to God's people has been so much harder—because of all the difficulty, hurt, and pain that it had caused me in the past. Could I believe in the promise of Psalm 23:5 “<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” or in another translation of the psalm—You prepare a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me. And God's people have troubled me. Could I believe there would be a space for me, even as others continued to tell me I didn't belong? Could I be a good shepherd to people despite all my own faults and failings, with all my own hurts and half-healed heart?

But as Francis of Assisi assures us, “If God can use me, God can use anyone!” Scripture and history are filled with women and men, with the unlikeliest, least talented, all rough edges sorts of people that God had created, that God had loved, and that God called to be shepherds, to guard and guide the Holy One's people. To care and keep for the flock. Who am I to say no? As a Lutheran I know I am both a sinner and saint at the same time. I am no better or worse than anyone here today. As pastor and theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber has said, “Never once did Jesus

scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to tell others about him. He always sent stumblers and sinners.” I, like her, find that extremely comforting.

So let me affirm what St. Francis said, If the Loving One can call me, then the Loving One can call all of us. In our own ways, in our own families, in our own neighborhoods, the Merciful One is calling each of us to love and care for others.

With our hands caring for the earth. With our feet carrying us forward on the journey. With our hearts open to welcome Jesus in our neighbor and Jesus in the stranger. This is what the Good Shepherd is calling us to. This is the path of righteousness that the Good Shepherd is leading us along.

We know that the Loving One is restoring us, all of us together and calling us to become the beloved community we read about in Acts today. The community in Acts was a community that shared and cared for one another. Not just with thoughts and prayers, but with food and companionship and financial aid when needed. Not just on Sundays in the choir or in the pews, but each and every day for each and every member. And God is calling us too to share Christ with the world through love and service to others. We call this “thy kingdom come,” the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

We know as God’s people that this kin-dom living is messy; it is mysterious. So often we go to God looking for some straightforward answers, and what happens? We end up getting God’s presence instead. Which is so much bigger, so much wilder than anything we went looking for in the first place.

This is what I found when I first came to Christ Lutheran Church. Not what I expected, not that I knew what to expect. What I found was all of you—a wild and woolly congregation, so much more than I knew what to do with. And over these past two years, I have prayed and done my best to be a good intern shepherd to you. I have hoped and prayed the same has been true for you—that even though you didn’t know what to expect from me when I arrived—that I haven’t been too woolly for you to love—that it hasn’t been too hard for you to receive love and care from me.

In my very first sermon I preached at Christ Lutheran Church, I said that Jesus was always about his father’s business, and his father’s business was bringing forth new life. Even from the dead places. Even from the dark valleys and the shadows of death. From places of grief, and hurt and sorrow. Bringing forth new life even as we fear an unknown future.

Jesus tells us today that he is a Good Shepherd. That he is sending good shepherds into the world to guard and guide God’s people. That we can step through today’s gate, not knowing what is on the other side but trusting in God’s promises for us. Believing that tomorrow, on the other side of the gate that Jesus is bringing us new life. New life. Not our old lives of fear and worry. Not our old lives stuck and troubled with the past. But new life. We can trust in that Jesus is going to give us new and abundant life. That the goodness and mercy of God are coming right along with us. That streams of mercy and goodness will be with us as we go forward.

This is my promise and my prayer to you today. This is the good news that I have been preaching to you these two years. This is also the good news that you have welcomed me with for our two years together. This is a faith that we can believe in as we part ways and go forward. This is our faith we can trust in that Jesus has indeed come to bring us new life, and that life will be an abundance beyond anything we could hope or dream of on our own. That this is the great abundance that God is calling us into, as we step forward on that path wherever it might lead us next.

This is the good news I have heard this week and bring to this morning.