



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 8

July 18, 2021

Gathering the Scattered

Mark 6:30–44

³⁰ The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. ³⁵ And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. ³⁶ Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” ³⁷ But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” ³⁸ And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” ³⁹ Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. ⁴¹ And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² And they all ate and were satisfied. ⁴³ And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. ⁴⁴ And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

Beloved in Christ, the last thing Jesus wants to do is scatter you. The last thing He wants – now that He has died and risen and gathered you into Himself through Holy Baptism – is for you to wander from the Faith, to go it on your own, to follow paths that lead to death instead of life. The last thing on His mind is to leave you in this world as sheep without a shepherd.

In today’s Gospel Mark writes of Jesus’ compassion for the masses, for they were wandering like sheep with no shepherd to lead them or give them rest. They were battered, broken, dazed, and confused. Nowhere to go; no one to turn to. So He began to teach them many things. And when He was finished, it was time for supper. And that’s how He always shepherds His sheep.

Sadly, many people live as though Jesus doesn’t want that for His little ones, for they have neither His teaching nor His feeding, in fact, they *refuse* to have them. They’re just wandering, scattered, somewhere out there on their own – shepherdless, untaught, unfed, sitting ducks in a world of wolves. Dear Sheep, that’s the last thing Jesus wants!



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So, why in the world did He give you pastors who are sinful men, who can themselves be the very reason that sheep drift away? No pastor I know can read our text from Jeremiah and not feel convicted. “Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the LORD.” “You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds,’ declares the LORD.”

But there’s a difference between the well meaning yet all-too-human pastors who truly want to shepherd the flock but fail on account of their human frailty and those being rebuked by the prophet. The shepherds, leaders, and rulers Jeremiah condemns are false ones, who scatter the sheep, who drive them off by their unfaithfulness, who burden them with made-up rules and regulations, who do not lead them in paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. They have themselves and *their* best interest in mind. They’re leaders who ordain, excuse, promote, protect, and publicize acts and ways of living that the Lord forbids. They do not comfort repentant sinners with the Grace of God, but either pretend that their abuses are not sinful and instead rebuke those who repent and want to do better, *or* they pile on the Law – the way the priests did when Judas repented and came, confessing what he’d done. “What is that to us?” they said. “What are *we* supposed to do about that? You’ll have to settle things with God yourself.” And so he did – by committing suicide!

Woe to those shepherds who scatter the flock like that – who leave people in their sins or turn them back upon themselves and their own actions for settling their affairs with God! Woe to those who, instead of driving off the wolves with right teaching, assist the wolves by preaching falsely, leaving little lambs of Jesus vulnerable to attack and starving for food. Woe to any shepherd who terrifies repentant sinners with more Law and fails to comfort them with the Gospel. Woe, therefore, to me, should I ever lose sight of the high calling of shepherding the sheep.

This can happen. You know, a pastor doesn’t have to be a heretic to be a false shepherd. All he has to be is a sinner. I know most of you think well of me, and I’m grateful for that. Many pastors don’t have the kind of flock that you’ve been to me these 13 years. But surely you’ve learned by now that my humanity is all too readily apparent. And one of the goals of a good shepherd is to train the sheep to know Scripture and their Catechism well enough to keep him on the straight and narrow. And I trust you to keep me from preaching that there’s anything in you that saves you, or acting like there’s anything in me that fills these pews. I trust you not to let me leave poor sinners in their unrepentance by preaching that God doesn’t care about sin or that He leaves it to you to atone for your sin.

Dear lambs of Jesus, that’s why I urge you to the hearing of what’s being preached from this pulpit, either by me or Pastor GeRue: That Jesus – *and no one else* – not *you* or *me* – [Jesus alone] is our Righteousness – the One who has compassion on those who have no shepherd, who poured His Blood out for us on the cross, who emptied Himself of



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all that He had and took our pitiful condition on Himself. He was driven off to a solitary place for you and me, and it was no vacation: “My God, My God, Why have You forsaken Me?” And in that solitude, He *became* our right-standing before God; the *reason* God will have compassion and look beyond our sins to the cross on which the blood was shed to pay for them.

And that is something that sheep need to go on hearing. “My sheep hear My Voice,” Jesus says. So, hear Him; hear Him like there’s nothing else for you to train your sheepy little ears on. You need it! For God has given you a sinful man to serve you as your pastor, the way He’s provided you imperfect spouses, imperfect children, imperfect parents, too. Hear the voice of Jesus, which covers every one of them like this: “I am their Righteousness! So, you can overlook whatever sin or quirk or little imperfection you notice. Honor your Father and Mother. I know they’re irritating. Look past all that and hear that I’m their Righteousness.” “Do not commit adultery. I know you’d like a different spouse. But don’t let that go scattering you, the way it has too often, for too many. Hear this: I’m her Righteousness; I’m his, too! So love, honor, and cherish them as you love, honor, and cherish Me.”

And if the pastor’s sermons are too long or hard to understand? The Lord is his Righteousness as well. Please keep on hearing him. He’s the shepherd God has given you. And if he isn’t smiling as often as he should, or looks a bit unraveled? He has his bad days, too. The Lord is still his Righteousness, as much as yours! And if he ever fails to speak with the voice of Christ, or falters in the truth, ask him: “Pastor, can we check the Scriptures and Confessions on this?” You see, that’s being sheepy, maybe even a little shepherdly! From time to time he needs that. Remember, the pastor may be your shepherd, but he’s a sheep, too!

So, let’s all hear the Gospel which declares that Jesus took our sins and died, and, because of that, the two are one. You and I, beloved, who were far off on account of our sin, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. He Himself is our Righteousness, our Peace with God and one another. He has united Jew and Gentile by tearing down the dividing wall of hostility between us sinners and God. What dividing wall remains between us? God can’t see it! He looks beyond our sins; relegates them to the pile of those covered by the blood of Jesus, and is no longer offended by the way we look, or smell, or think, or speak, or act. How can He be, when He has subsumed all of that within the Flesh of His own dear Son? Jesus has fulfilled the Law, with all its rules and regulations, putting to death the hostility His Father had every right to hold against us! We stand together under the cross of Christ, cleansed, healed, and purified by the crimson tide flowing from His wounds. How can we not be gathered together, regardless of those things which threaten to keep us apart?

But you may have noticed in the reading from Jeremiah, that even God is capable of driving off His sheep: “Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them,” declares the LORD.” God drives us by the Law *when we insist*



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on doing what we shouldn't; when we insist on living like we're not His sheep. He disciplines the ones He loves. He drove Israel off into Babylon, and, perhaps in similar ways, He disciplines us, telling us our sins are not forgiven as long as we refuse to repent, allowing us to go through what we stubbornly bring upon ourselves. If He must, He'll tell us: "You don't want forgiveness? Okay, you won't have it. You don't want a shepherd? Alright, you'll do without." And despite how much it pains Him – and it *does!* – He will leave us just as we insist on being – without His teaching or feeding, until we finally permit Him to rescue us and bring us home.

For that is His ultimate desire, beloved: to rescue us – to gather up His scattered ones, the way He gathers us today. He just can't stand to see His sheep without a shepherd – not fed, not watered by His Word, not hearing that all is well with us and so we need not be afraid, terrified, or driven to despair the way we so often are. And so, through parents, pastors, friends, and neighbors, this is what He's saying: "Here is your Salvation, the Lord your Righteousness! Leave your wandering and live beside My water. Come and lie down in My pasture. Come and hear My preaching, My teaching. Listen to My Absolution! Come and eat and drink My Body and Blood in this Supper – and never again live in fear!"

Sadly, there are those who take offense at that, because they think they can stand right with God someplace other than where the Shepherd has His Rod and Staff, His Pastures, His Water, His overflowing Cup, His Table. But what else do we expect? A faithful Shepherd will surely drive away the wolves, but His Voice will gather His Sheep. And so, He gathers you today. He's taught you. His heart has gone out to you. Now, it's time to feed you. You are not shepherdless, dear lambs. You can't be. After all, the Lord is, as He has always been, our Righteousness. In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen