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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
4th Sunday of Easter, Year B

John 10:11-18; Acts 4:5-12

This is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! Amen

There's a commercial for Stouffer's lasagna that I think is one of the better ads on TV these days. A football coach says that when his team comes to the dinner table—to eat lasagna, of course!—they are not allowed to talk about football. He wants to emphasize that football isn't everything that's important in life. At the end of the ad he says, "I hunger to coach athletes into men." This coach is a shepherd who knows his sheep and guides them to a full life—with and beyond football.

Coaches are one of the many shepherds in our society who have influence on our young people. I'm sure we can all think of other shepherds we've had in our lives—teachers, music directors, a boss or manager. Not all leaders understand their role as being a shepherd who guides others to places where they can grow and learn. Many leaders don't get to know their employees or team members beyond the job they do or the position they play. But the really good coaches and teachers and employers do.

In the gospel reading today Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd who would do anything for his sheep, even to the point of laying down his life. The Good Shepherd stands in contrast to the "hired hand" that doesn't care for the sheep and runs away when danger comes near.

We most often hear the message that we are the sheep in this metaphor and that we need to be careful about who we follow. A hired hand is someone in a leadership position who really doesn't know us and cares more for their own life or reputation than those in his or her care. The Good Shepherd has our life and best interest at heart and that's who we should follow. I'm sure we've all heard a sermon or two with that lesson, and it's a good one.

This morning I'd like to think about the idea of the hired hand in a little different way. If in that traditional interpretation we know Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we also know that there are times when we are not only the sheep. We are sometimes called into positions of caring for others. How might we be a different kind of hired hand than the one Jesus describes? Let's take a look at Peter for that conversation.

The passage from Acts is a continuation from last Sunday's first reading. Peter and John came across a lame man sitting at the gate of the temple begging from those who passed by. Peter and John did not offer the man food or money but said to him, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And immediately his feet and ankles were made strong and he stood and walked and leaped for joy!

This healing was amazing and many came to believe in Jesus because of it. But it was a threatening act to the religious leaders. They thought Jesus was dead and they were through with him. But now his name was being declared again, and a man was

miraculously healed by that name, so they arrested Peter and John. In our first reading today Peter guides his listeners to Jesus through his bold proclamation.

But Peter was not always such an outspoken leader. Peter had once been the kind of hired hand that ran away when the going got tough.

Peter had willingly left his home and his fishing boats to follow Jesus. He had been a good student, learning from all of Jesus' confusing parables. He had seen how demons and stormy winds obeyed Jesus' voice. And he witnessed Jesus' love for the outcast—like tax collectors, women, the sick and the lame. Peter is named more than any other disciple in the gospels so we can assume that he was front and center, learning directly from the Master how to be the kind of shepherd Jesus calls us all to be.

But every time Jesus talked about what was coming, that he would be laying down his life for his sheep—by being arrested, beaten, killed—AND that he would rise again, Peter would object and argue. That's not what how he expected or wanted things to go.

When Jesus was arrested, Peter stood in the courtyard outside of the place where Pontius Pilate was interrogating him. When the going got tough, Peter denied knowing Jesus, not once but three times. Peter was like that wimpy hired hand.

In our human societies and structures there are more hired hands than there are leaders. There are more employees than managers. There are more team members than coaches. There are more students than teachers. Yet, each of us is given opportunities to shepherd someone else.

We shepherd our children as parents and grandparents. We shepherd our friends and neighbors when we work together and share our time and resources with them. We can shepherd others in whatever position we hold by caring for people, knowing their names, and expressing the love of our Good Shepherd in the ways God has gifted us.

That's what Peter finally figured out. He grew up into the kind of shepherd who guided others to Jesus. He didn't take credit for healing the man at the gate. It was by the name of Jesus that the man was healed and Peter is no longer embarrassed or afraid to name Jesus Christ or to belong to him.

What caused that transformation in Peter? This healing event took place after Peter and the other disciples received the power of the Holy Spirit. In the Nicene Creed we say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God with us now, beyond Jesus' resurrection and ascension. The Holy Spirit is God's ongoing power to transform all believers.

In Holy Baptism the Spirit comes to us, too. At the font we receive Christ's call to be fellow shepherds with Jesus and with other believers. We are called to know and care for one another as Jesus' flock, to guide others to feed on the green pastures of God's Word of Life, to drink from the still waters of God's grace and mercy, and to walk together as sisters and brothers along the pathways laid out for us by our Good Shepherd.

Sometimes this shepherding role can be scary as we decide whether to face the forces of evil in the world and speak the truth of God's love into difficult situations or to ignore the hurts and tragedies and even turn our backs on them. Jesus faced the ultimate in betrayal and rejection and did not turn his back, but laid down his life so that his flock—you and I—would be set free from the power that sin and death holds over us.

When we encounter the struggles between parents and children, employers and employees, coaches and teams, and even between neighbors and friends, we are called to follow our Good Shepherd. Jesus will lead us to listen even when we don't agree, to speak with love rather than to convince, to go the extra mile in our caring, and to trust in the movement of the Holy Spirit to bring life and healing by the name of Jesus Christ.

The theme on our Taking Faith Home inserts for today states: "Faith is formed through personal, trusted relationships." Our most trusted relationship is with Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. As we grow in faith, learning to rely on Jesus to lead and guide us, we are transformed into fellow shepherds WITH Jesus and with other believers. May we take this calling seriously as we live in faith and love with those God places in our care.

Thanks be to God! Amen