

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Luth Church of the Master, Troy
May 9, 1976 (Mother's Day)

"EASIER SAID THAN DONE"

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd." John 10:14-16

I must begin by being very honest: I know very little about shepherds, and only a very little more about sheep. Like many of you, I have a very romantic notion about shepherds and sheep.

We've all seen our fair share of dignified pastoral scenes. With sheep lazily grazing, and shepherds serenely smiling over the flock.

From what I'm told and have read, that's all quite a myth. I'm told that most shepherds are prime candidates for the grime and grub. Living in the wilderness -- yes, literally laying down the lives for the flock -- they are probably the most filthy, freaked out characters we'd ever want to meet.

Likewise, the sheep. I'm told the sheep is about the dumbest creature on four legs. A helpless beast when left to itself. It cannot find green pasture by itself - it must be led there. It cannot scent water - it must be led to it. A sheep strays all over the place.

Contrary to "Little Bo Peep" which says, "Leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them;" a sheep is forever a lost and condemned creature when it strays. It is least capable of defending itself amongst the animal world.

Is it then any wonder that Jesus compared us to sheep. Man, like a sheep, when left to his own nature is the dumbest thing on two legs.

Separated from God by sin, man is dumb, helpless, and hopeless. Left to ourselves, or listening to the false shepherds of society, we would blindly stray into the wolfish jaws of hell and think we were doing the right thing.

When straying away from the Father's house, time and time again we've seen how hard it is for such people to find their way back to the Father's door.

Yes - there's only one way we get back -- the good shepherd must be around to help us. And contrary to all of our religious talk, there seems to be a scarcity of good shepherds these days. Yes - Christ IS the good shepherd -- but to follow his example IS MUCH EASIER SAID THAN DONE.

I make this assertion from simply looking at what Jesus, the good shepherd, says by way of John's gospel. He says - the good shepherd KNOWS his own, and his own KNOW him.

Think about that. How well do you know one another? How much effort and initiative have you taken to get to know your fellow sheepfold? To be a follower of the good shepherd MEANS we place a HIGH PRIORITY on knowing him and each other.

Each time we receive NEW MEMBERS, I watch carefully to see how many good shepherds there are at the Master. That's why people join the church - to be cared about and to care for others. Yes - that's EASIER SAID THAN DONE - but we're here to DO IT.

Jesus says - he'll lay down his life for the sheep. It doesn't take a theologian to interpret his meaning -- it means the good shepherd is willing to SACRIFICE.

Yes - that's also EASIER SAID, THAN DONE. But Christians come together NOT to talk about it, but to DO IT.

Finally - Jesus says - good shepherds are not exclusive -- they also seek out sheep who are not already a part of the fold. That's the mission -- to build up Christ's body, not only in numbers - but in concern and compassion for other people.

God only knows -- that's easier said than done. But that's why we're here - not just to stroke one another - but to be inspired to reach out beyond the confines of the congregation.

And why do we strive for this INTIMACY -- this SACRIFICING -- this REACHING OUT. Jesus says - so that there shall be ONE FLOCK, ONE SHEPHERD.

That's the ultimate goal. We do it so that there will be unity of spirit among families, among nations, and among Christians and all religious peoples.

That's the aim of the good shepherd -- to bring unity among families, nations, and all religious peoples. And Jesus Christ is the one true shepherd who can do that -- whether in our homes, in our jobs, among nations, and for all religions.

This is Christian FAmily Week - and as I listen to conversations among families in this congregation -- I hear how desperately A GOOD SHEPHERD IS NEEDED. I hear how both parents and children so often are like sheep -- unwilling to listen, blind to the need around them, straying away from the fold.

Yes, American families today too often resemble a bunch of dumb sheep. Concerned only about doing his or her own thing -- no longer heeding the voice of their Lord or his love. Only concerned about piling up one's own treasure and pleasure.

Which one of us can deny that there is not a NEW NEED for the good shepherd's values of INTIMACY, SACRIFICE, AND REACHING OUT in our families. God help us to tune in to the voice

of his son, the good shepherd. There's no doubt about it - that's EASIER SAID THAN DONE. But as his church - as his Christian family - that's our goal in response to HIS LAYING DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US.

That goal of unity of spirit is truly appropriate on this Mother's Day -- for so often mothers DO assume the good shepherd role. So often they are the ones who promote INTIMACY, SACRIFICE, AND REACHING OUT -- the qualities of the good shepherd who seeks a unity of spirit among his sheep

This goal is especially important this year -- our Bicentennary and Election. Already we hear from candidates a rhetoric which is so contrary to the good shepherd - a rhetoric of exclusiveness and divisiveness. A rhetoric which dissects humanity into everlasting opposing forces.

God help us in 1976 to heed the voice of the good shepherd - so that there shall be one flock, one shepherd - among families, nations, and religious peoples.

AMEN

EASTER IV
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
May 6, 1979

"TIME TO TAKE INVENTORY"

Text: Gospel - John 10:11-18

For many businesses, inventory time is long past. But this great Good Shepherd text brought to mind the whole notion of taking inventory of one's Christian life.

For the Christian - there are always two basic categories to inventory: what you are - and what you are becoming.

In one sense - the same answer could be given for both of these categories. That is - what you are is a child of God who is loved by God. And what you are becoming is a child of God who is loved by God.

But with that said - the next question is: WHAT DIFFERENCE HAS THAT MADE IN YOUR LIFE?? How has God's love for you MADE YOU DIFFERENT? And taking it one step further: What are you becoming because of God's love for you?

You see - these inventory questions -- attempt to get at the by-products of God's love. And in a beautiful way - John offers some classic images in this good shepherd text of what people are ... and of what we might become.

Notice the images -- we might even call this mini-parables. We have three basic metaphors here, namely -- the good shepherd, the hired hand, and the wolves. *All regard to the sheep.*

How would you classify yourself right now in terms of these three types??

- like the good shepherd
- like the hired hand
- or like the wolf.

What role are you offering in this Christian community? What is your position as a Christian -- as a child of God? How do you function as a Christian -- not only here in church, but in your home, your job, your school, your business?

Are you ~~the~~ a good shepherd? Do you convey an attitude of deep concern for those around you, as well as for those who are different from you?

Are you just a hired hand? Like the gospel person -- do you just stick around when things are going well? But like that hired man -- when the heats on -- do you take off? Do you leave the sheepfold in a precarious position? Do you leave the tough work for someone else? Are you just a Sunday suntan Christian -- leaving the grubby work of discipleship to everybody else? Yes... are you just a hired hand Christian -- where your faith is no more significant than the rest of the clubs and organizations you belong to??

Or are you one of the wolves? By your conversation, your attitude, your actions -- are you seeking to destroy the Christian sheepfold? Are you out to get the body of Christ -- or any one of the sheep in that body?

Whatever way you've answered these questions -- gives you some idea of your present inventory as a Christian.

I obviously don't know yours as well as I know my own. But I do know that my inventory can be classified in all three categories -- good shepherd, hired hand, and wolf. I wish all my days were good shepherd days -- but that's just not the way it goes. Recently -- I found out from one of our members that some visitors had been here a few times and really felt they had been treated coldly! Instead of being a good shepherd -- I obviously had come off like a hired hand.

I'm not proud of that. And I'm not proud of the fact that the whole congregation was felt to be a lot of hired hands -- people who really didn't

care about new sheep in our fold. I would urge you -- as I'm urging myself this morning -- to take a more careful inventory of our sheepfold today and every Sunday. Let us be good shepherds-- seeking out the new and the lost amidst our fold. By all means - let us seek to be more than hired hands.

And yet - let us also be honest ourselves... and with those who are new or lost among us. We are not perfect shepherds. In fact, we're sometimes even poor hired hands. We make mistakes. We overlook human needs. We sometimes act as if we don't care. We sometimes even act like wolves-- gossiping, and groning, and griping, and begrudging one another.

In fact - that's why most of us are here -- because we're in need of a good shepherd. One who has laid down his life for us. One who has forgiven us for the way we often are. And I for one am mighty thankful for Jesus Christ - cause without him I'd be a pretty, messed-up guilty sheep.

And yet once forgiven - he calls me TO BECOME more than I have been before. Yes, part of taking inventory IS TO CHANGE THE PRESENT STATUS OF THINGS. Or stated differently, what am I becoming for the sake of Christ????

Is God's love causing me TO BECOME more of a good shepherd and less like a hired hand or wolf?

Is God helping me to lay down my life for others -- especially for the lost sheep or the stranger? Or like the hired hand, am I running scared from every new challenge that God puts before me? Am I running away from new opportunities of ministry?

Or worst of all - am I causing God's sheep to be harmed or scattered? Is my Christian faith bringing a power of love to the church, to my

family, to other families, to my working associates -- is my faith building up these relationships... or is it tearing down relationships. Am I functioning like a good shepherd --- or like a wolf??

The option to **BECOME** any one of these types of Christian is very real in this body of Christ. But in this congregation at this moment of history -- there are some phenomenal opportunities **TO BECOME GOOD SHEPHERDS.**

Just the phenomenal growth of the area makes the good shepherd role **AN ABSOLUTE NATURAL.** As Jesus says here: There are other sheep which belong to me that are not in this sheep pen. I must bring them too.

The parish planning committee has been working hard **EVERY WEEK** for the past several weeks on a 5-year plan of ministry. Regretably - the good shepherds on this committee have not had the support of the committee-of-the-whole.

Today - we especially stand at the crossroads of a totally new dimension of good-shepherd ministry. Last night's sharing session was a deeply moving and growing experience for those present. Within the next hour -- we will decide whether we will **BECOME THE GOOD SHEPHERD** to a refugee family -- or whether we'll run away from the challenge?

Whatever our decision - Christ will still be our Savior -- and he will still love us as his own children. But obviously -- his love will stand for much more **WHEN WE SEEK TO BECOME GOOD SHEPHERDS LIKE HIM.** I pray that we will bring these new sheep to him ... even if they still may be strangers to him and to us.

Because as we love like him -- we will become one flock with one shepherd. And when the final inventory is taken -- God hopes that we will all be counted among that **ONE FLOCK! AMEN**

EASTER IV

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 10, 1981 (MOTHER'S DAY)

"OPEN THE DOOR TO THE ABUNDANT LIFE!"

"Truly, truly, I am the door of the sheep ... if anyone enters by me he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that (you) may have life, and have it abundantly."

John 10:9-10

Every new father who has shared a delivery-room birth experiences in a new way the miraculous nature of life. That new father also gains an insight on the miraculous nature of motherhood. God has truly given mothers some of the greatest charisma of all -- motherhood is truly among the greatest of gifts. Experiencing the gift of birth twice has truly left this father in speechless awe of motherhood.

Of course - the ecstasy of those delivery room experiences soon passes ... only to be replaced by sleepless nights and my real specialty -- burping baby. Quite seriously -- I have found myself pondering more deeply this week about the whole nature of life -- especially in light of today's text.

Jesus says - I have come that you might have life... and have it more abundantly. That surely causes this new father to ask: *For what purpose has God brought little pink cherubs like Sarah into this weary, challenging world?*
Nissa

Is God's purpose for this child and all children -- merely to give them physical existence? Is that the whole reason behind God's game plan? Is that God's definition of life? Are we born merely to be different colored and different shaped products of creation? If that's the case, then God's purpose is no greater than any other merchandiser.

Or has Sarah already been given a psychological script from God? And like a tape recorder, her whole life-purpose is merely to play out the tape. Is this the way God has fashioned life? Are we merely pre-recorded tapes to be played back for some predetermined length of time? Sadly but truly - many people buy into this kind of mechanized

determinism.

Or could it be that God has given Sarah life because he has some particular role for her to play -- some service for her to give -- some mission for her to perform -- some joy for her to bring to others?

It is this third purpose which is God's purpose for Sarah and for all of us -- he has given us life in order that we might give one another a greater fullness of life! He has given us life in order that we might OPEN THE DOOR that leads to Jesus Christ -- because behind that door God shows us the real potential for our lives. Behind that door *is the example of* the true shepherd -- the one who knows *intimacy*, *care*, *deeply*, *leads* *graciously*, and protects from all evil.

God has not created us merely to exist. Nor has he created us to function like pre-determined tape recordings. But he has created us to live in his image -- the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. And to live in the image of Christ leads to greater fullness of life -- to the abundance of love, *to greater* compassion, and concern for others. This is the abundant life -- it has nothing to do with possessions or things; it has everything to do with the qualities of serving and sacrificing for others.

According to God's purpose, we enter this world like Sarah Martyn -- like blind, bleeding, and somewhat bewildered little sheep. We enter totally dependent upon the shepherding of others. Then God calls us to grow up -- to live in this world as servants instead of sheep -- as persons willing to sacrifice for others. Finally -- we leave this world as sanctified saints -- forever holy and blameless. Not because we have been perfect, but because we have received his perfecting forgiveness.

To characterize our life journey in these metaphors of sheep, servants, and saints sounds so easy. Yet we all know the pilgrimage is often a real struggle -- especially in that middle phase of life, from confirmation to cardiac arrest. Those are the difficult and challenging years -- because during this time God gives us greater freedom to open whatever door we choose. Obviously, he wants us to choose the door that leads to his kind of living, the abundant life, the life of Christ.

That's why during these years he calls us to be more than sheep -- he calls us to be Good Shepherds -- to be dedicated, sacrificial servants for our children and one another. People often ask why Lutherans put so much emphasis upon catechism and adult education. The answer is simple. These are the years when we are most tempted to stray away from the door that leads to Christ and possibly choose to enter the door that leads to the Jolly Trolley... or some other fantasy of life.

We live in an age of pluralism -- an age when we are told that there is no such thing as one Good Shepherd. The Word instead is that there are many shepherds -- all equals. In the movie, "Oh God," George Burns playing God is asked by John Denver, a supermarket manager, "Is Jesus really the Son of God?" George Burns speaking as God responds: "Yes, Jesus is the Son of God. But so is Moses, and so is Mohammed, and so is Mahatma Gandhi, and so are you."

Obviously - in the generic sense - all of us are God's sons--God's children. But the implication of this film is that Jesus is no different from all the rest -- he is just one son among many.

As much as I enjoyed this movie, I could see how a box office success like this could easily lead people astray. For many people - this is the only theology they get. And in order to appeal to the masses and offend no one, this movie's producers made Jesus into just another good guy among many. In so doing, we can see why Jesus warns his followers to 'beware of false prophets in sheep's clothing.' It's so easy and tempting to be "taken in" by the pluralistic prophets of our society

But God's Word challenges this false prophecy. Jesus says: "I am the door of the sheep; ... I know my own and my own know me ... and I lay down my life for the sheep." The abundant life is not found behind the doors of the Chase Manhattan, the Lion's Store, or any other successful operation. True - these places may offer an abundance of things, but not the abundant life. Only one door leads to the abundant life -- the door that leads to the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Many members and non-members of Hope have often asked me why the doors of this building are painted red. And not until this past week in researching for this sermon did I finally discover the most authentic answer: Namely, many churches have had the tradition of painting their front doors red to symbolize the door to the kingdom, made red by the blood shed on Calvary. Thus - the doors of Hope Church are symbolically saying -- "Open these doors and you will find the abundant life -- the life of the One who gave up his life to rescue us from our alienation from God and one another." Open the doors of Hope and receive the abundant life -- the forgiveness of God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

The doors of Hope Church unequivocally announce that Jesus Christ is the true source of life for this body of his people. Contrary to the pluralistic notions of our society - the doors of Hope proclaim that God has spoken and acted once and for all through Jesus Christ. Open these doors and God promises us a place with Christ now and forever.

In the meantime -- God calls us to be shepherds for those still searching for a more abundant life. He calls upon us to OPEN THE DOOR and lead others through the doorway to share Christ's forgiving and sacrificial love. And where have we found this shepherding example of Christ most abundantly?

I doubt that there's any better model of Christ's shepherding love than the one shared by the mothers of the world. To be a mother is to know the real meaning of laying down your life for the sheep. Pregnancy alone is a real sacrifice -- to say nothing of the dedication that's required after birth. The facts are that the average Christian congregation would be in real trouble without mothers -- because mothers are often the Good Shepherds of American households -- they are the ones who motivate their families TO OPEN THE DOOR THAT LEADS TO CHRIST.

And so today we give thanks for Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who has taught us the real purpose and meaning of life. But we also give thanks for the millions of mothers who have responded to Christ's example of

sacrificial love. As for us fathers -- God loves us dearly and has forgiven us far more than we have often forgiven others. As the saying goes -- we have come a long way (many) -- but we have miles to go before we live up to the example of our wives and mothers -- to say nothing of Christ.

And so on this Mother's Day and this last day of Christian family Week -- God calls us as mothers and fathers ... and as brothers, sisters, and friends of Christ -- to lead our children and one another to the door of Christ. And to OPEN THE DOOR to the abundant life --

the abundant life	OF GIVING AND FORGIVING	like Christ;
" " "	OF TEACHING AND PRAYING	" "
" " "	OF LOVING LIKE SHEPHERDS	

who willingly sacrifice for the common good of others.

In Jesus Christ, we have been given more than mere physical existence -- more than a pre-determined script for our lives. We have received the fulness of God's love -- a relationship that cannot be stolen, killed, or destroyed in any way. We have OPENED THE DOOR TO THE ABUNDANT LIFE . . . so let us make the most of it!

AMEN

EASTER IV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 22 1982

"IT'S ABOUT CALLING DOGS AND SHEEP"

"I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

John 10:14-15

Dudley is a seven-year-old buff cocker spaniel belonging to the Rev. Harley G. Rusch. Like most cocker spaniels, Dudley never figured that he'd become a famous theologian. But his master didn't see it that way.

Pastor Rusch, like any good preacher, had been struggling to find a meaningful way to bring faith and life together day-by-day for his congregation. Quite by accident, he began to incorporate parables about Dudley into his sermons. To his amazement he found that his parishoners couldn't get enough of Dudley -- they loved his dog stories. In fact, he came to learn that there was hardly anything in creation that his people loved more than dogs. And so an innocent dog story or two ultimately led to this delightful book, Dudley's Dog Days.

I am indebted today to both Dudley and Pastor Rusch. And should you see in the weeks ahead sermon titles bearing the name of Dudley or his breed, you will know that on that Sunday you're in for another dog story.

Enough for today's prologue. Let's get on with Dudley's parable for today, Good Shepherd Sunday. Like most cocker spaniels, Dudley knows his name ... at least the sound of his name. He learned that sound at a very young age. If you call him, he comes --- at least when he wants to. But unlike Hollywood dogs like Lassie, Dudley will not do tricks for just any ole person who calls his name.

However, when Pastor Rusch calls his name, Dudley comes running --- most of the time. If the call is for a treat, or for dinner, or for a walk -- Dudley rushes to Pastor Rusch. If the call is to come into the house at night for for getting his hair brushed -- Dudley usually takes his good-natured time.

One day a very good friend of Pastor Rusch's visited. He

had been of those old-time friends whom you really wanted to impress with your well-trained dog. The friend's first interchange with Dudley included petting and chasing a yellow ball from the living room to the dining room .. and from the living room to the dining room ... and from the living room to the dining room. A dog friendship had begun. There was no doubt about it -- by afternoon Dudley knew he had found a new playmate.

Yet late in the afternoon in the back yard, Pastor Rusch's with great excitement called for Dudley: "Here Dudley, come on boy! Come on Dudley, come here!" But Dudley merely sat and stared. He lowered one shoulder a little, but would not come.

Pastor Rusch then called for Dudley -- and immediately the cocker spaniel came. Pastor Rusch's friend responded: "I guess there's more to a dog than merely knowing his name. It's the master's voice that makes the real difference."

That same truth is illustrated today for the sheep of the Good Shepherd. There are many voices beckoning for our commitment in today's society. But like Dudley, Christ's followers distinguish between God's voice and all the other voices demanding obedience.

/Much like Pastor Rusch's voice and his friends -- both voices had equal intensity ... both voices were equally dynamic ... both voices were in the same profession ... both voices were demanding Dudley's attention. But Dudley responded to Pastor Rusch's voice because they had developed a deep, lasting, trusting, and sensitive relationship to one another. Or as John says: "I am the good shepherd: I know my own and my own know me."

The majority of you who are here today are like Dudley: you have trained yourself to the voice of the Gospel. That's why you're here week after week -- not because it's any easier for you than anyone else, but because you have come to know the love of the Good Shepherd. You have heard his voice in the water of Baptism. You have experienced his voice in the blood of Calvary. You have tasted his voice in the grace of the Eucharist. You have studied his voice through the preaching and teaching of his good shepherds. You have

enjoyed his voice through the music of hymns, and organ, and choirs. You have come to know that his voice can be trusted; that his voice is one which seeks to guide and comfort you. You have made the voice of the Good Shepherd a priority of your lives ... and in doing so you have been blessed ... and have become a blessing to others.

And just like Dudley -- you have had to decipher this Good Shepherd's voice from all the others beckoning your allegiance. The voices of success, the voice of pleasure, the voices of immorality, the voices of greed, and many more -- all of these have sought to claim your total obedience, esp. on Sunday mornings. But the voice of the Good Shepherd has cut through this world of noise and clatter. No matter what your other interests or commitments -- you have stopped your play and your pleasure long enough to hear and receive the guidance of the Good Shepherd who knows his own. Your ears and your eyes have been sensitive to your Master's voice, because you have come to know that nothing is as important or as compelling as the Word of God.

And so we gather to hear our Good Shepherd today; and as we fulfill the mutual roles of shepherd and sheep, we give thanks for Him who shows us the way, the truth, and the life for Hope Lutheran Church. For in laying down his life for this flock, we have been assured that nothing can separate us from his love and forgiveness. In thanksgiving, he calls us to make sacrifices for the sake of his love on earth.

Yes, like Dudley, thanks be to God that we have come to know the voice of the Good Shepherd even as he has come to know us. And yet when Dudley does not listen, Pastor Rusch becomes very angry with him. You may feel the same way with your own dog. Imagine then, what love God holds for all of us. For he continues to speak to us even while many have continued to ignore his voice and his call. God help us to lead them back through the forgiving voice of the Good Shepherd.

AMEN

EASTER IV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 13, 1984 (Mother's Day)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHAT A STYLE!"

"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." Acts 6:8

"For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." I Peter 2:25

"I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.... The thief comes only to steal, I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly."

John 10:8,10

Pastor Keyser from Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo, tells a classic story that captures the essence of today's texts.

It's the story of two business, one a newcomer to the company, who were talking about various things one day over lunch.

The first businessman said: "Well, I'll tell you one thing -- I'm really getting tired with my church. They are always asking for something: it's either MORE money, or MORE volunteer tasks; or go here or there to do this or that; or attend this special seminar or that special Bible study; or come to this Lenten dinner or that Fellowship Fling ... it goes on and on! I'm just fed up with it all!! Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice -- that's all you ever here over there! I've really had it with all that "sacrifice stuff" - I wish they'd put an end to it!!

His new business associate replied: "I think I know what you mean. I had a similar experience with my boy. It cost my wife and I a quite a bit when this boy was born -- he was premature and had to stay at the hospital several weeks. Then we spent a real load to raise this boy -- clothes, school supplies, all kinds of things including expensive sports equipment. Then when he turned sixteen he took my car and wrecked it only two weeks after he got his license. That was a tremendous expense! Then it was off to college -- more and more money!! More sacrifice! But finally it all ended!!

The other associate looked at him with a big grin and said: "I'll bet you were really glad when that was all over -- boy, you really laid it out for that kid!!"

His associate responded: "No, I wasn't glad that it's all over. Every bit of that sacrifice was worth it. You see, my son is now dead!"

Sacrifice, sacrifice, sacrifice -- it's all a matter of one's perspective and commitment to that for which we are making the sacrifices! The facts are -- we make sacrifices for those things ... those persons ... those events that we really care about -- that we really love! And when we lose the relationships for which those sacrifices have been made -- it really hurts -- it hurts very deep!

None of us is against sacrifice -- it's just a matter of perspective as to that for which we will make them. Stephen, the first martyr of Christianity, was a man who made a sacrifice! He loved God deeply! He believed without equivocation in the resurrection of Jesus Christ! He trusted totally in the promises of God through Jesus Christ! With that kind of faith framework -- there was nothing that would diminish his commitment to sacrifice for God Almighty!

That's a basic message of our faith in Jesus Christ! We live a resurrection style of life! Resurrection invades every part of our being! We do not live to "play it safe" once we have experienced Christ -- we live to give, to share, to offer ourselves as we have received from Christ! We live A STYLE that far surpasses the average person in this world!!

Christians live a style of trust and sacrifice that is different -- very unique in this world!! We are not mere listeners to sentimental stories of scripture -- to beautiful tales of heroic figures like Peter, Stephen or Jesus Christ himself! We do not just "hear" good news -- we seek to LIVE GOOD NEWS!!

Nor are we just "good Christian people" who go to worship every Sunday!! Obviously - we are good people who pay our taxes, who help our neighbors, and who are even sometimes willing "to give the shirts of iur backs." But these good deeds do not make us "Good Christians" -- nor do they make us worthy of salvation! We are not saved or rescued from death on the basis of our good deeds.

We can do all these "good deeds" and still totally miss out on the real essence of faith!! We can even tell others the "good news" and still be missing THE REAL STYLE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CHRISTIAN!!

For the REAL STYLE OF A CHRISTIAN is TRUST and CONFIDENCE in Jesus Christ and his promises!! And once we have that trust -- that causes us to manifest A STYLE OF SACRIFICE FOR OTHERS!!

That was the uniqueness of St. Stephen!! We're told that Stephen had the faith, grace, power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. In short, that simply meant that he could see the long view of things. By no means did that mean that Stephen was going to be spared problems in his life! We need only look at the record to have that varified!

We're told that he was not only an able administrator of the gifts for the widows and needy -- he also showed great wonders for the people! He taught and he preached with enthusiasm -- his words and his spirit were irresistible!! The Jews could not negate his spirit or his wisdom -- his love for Christ was contagious! So their last recourse was force -- they arrested Stephen!

But that only led Stephen to preach and teach from prison! In Acts 7 - we have his longest sermon! He proclaimed that Jesus Christ would give the people a fresh, new, exciting relationship with God. I would supersede the old law and bondage of their present religion. Boldly, Stephen declared that the religious leaders were "stiffnecked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, who were resisting the Holy Spirit. He proclaimed that Jesus was not only the Messiah (the Son of God), but also the "son of Man" -- namely the Savior of the World!!

That meant Stephen was saying that not only the Jews would be saved through Christ -- but that the whole world would be saved!! They couldn't tolerate that kind of faith!! That would mean they were no longer "the spe/cial ones" the favored, the elect, the privileged and exclusive ones! This Good News ignited their wrath and fury and they had Stepehn stoned to death! They killed his body; but they did not kill his Spirit!!

It is Stephen's spirit of trust and sacrifice in the Lord that still lives among us today!! That's why we proclaim and trust in a risen Lord -- because St. Stephen gave us that KIND OF STYLE!! That's why we sacrifice and sacrifice and sacrifice even more -- because that is the only way that others WILL TRULY BELIEVE THAT WE TRUST CHRIST AND THAT WE BELIEVE IN HIS PROMISES!! It is through our trust and sacrifice that this world comes to know that Jesus Christ is truly risen -- risen indeed!!

It was through Stephen's trust and sacrifice THAT FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIANS CAME TO KNOW THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST!! It is no different for 20th century Christians!! It is through our style of trust ... and our style of sacrifice that people today will REALLY KNOW THAT JESUS CHRIST IS OUR LORD ... AND WE TRUST HIS PROMISES!!

There is never any doubt about it!! We will make a ready sacrifice for anyone or anything that we believe in -- that we really trust in!! That trust is beautifully illustrated through the story of the two little boys!!

There was a family who had two boys -- separated by eight years. The older brother had terribly scarred hands -- very ugly hands to look at!! The boys got along very well -- except the little boy was always ashamed of his big brother when they went into public places. He was really embarrassed by his brother's ugly hands! In fact he would whisper to his brother: "Put your hands out of sight -- put them in your pockets or do something with them."

One day - when the little brother had finally grown up a little -- the older brother asked him to sit down 'cause he wanted to share a story! "Jeff" he said to his little brother, "when you were a tiny baby and mom and dad were gone one day -- there was a terrible fire in our house. It spread to your room -- pretty soon flames were engulfing your crib. I rushed into your room and lifted your little body away from the flames. Today, there is not one single mark on you -- but my hands will be scarred for my lifetime.

Tears came to Jeff's eyes as he heard the story!! It was his brother's sacrifice THAT HAD SAVED HIM! He took his brother's hands -- held them to his lips and kissed them -- and never again WAS HE EMBARRASSED BY THOSE HANDS!! Those hands had trusted in Christ's love ... they had risked it all for him -- they had made the ultimate sacrifice!!

I remember my mother's hands very well. They were not scarred -- they had not been through a fire!! But they were hands of sacrifice! They were hands that had been folded in trusting prayer to Jesus Christ many times -- but they were also hands that gave and gave and gave!! They were hands that were skinny and frail from hard work. They were hands that made many sacrifices -- sacrifices for me, sacrifices for others, but above all, sacrifices for Jesus Christ and his

church.

If you are still lucky enough to have your mother alive -- I ask you today to take a good hard look at her hands. I venture that you will see there HANDS THAT YOU CAN TRUST -- hands that have led you and guided you to Jesus Christ -- hands that have held you and comforted you in your pain -- hands that have brought you to worship Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior! Hands that may not be frail, worn, and thin, but nevertheless HANDS THAT HAVE WILLINGLY SACRIFICED IN ORDER that you and I might have THE ABUNDANT LIFE -- the life and promises of Jesus Christ.

Yes - this day I give thanks for Stephen -- for his brave proclamation -- for his strong trust in Jesus Christ -- for his willingness to die FOR THE SAKE OF JESUS CHRIST. For through that sacrifice -- I have come to better trust and believe -- and I have learned an important lesson on sacrifice!

But like Stephen -- I also give thanks for my mother -- and the many other mothers of this world. For they too have trusted in Christ; they too have made many sacrifices to show me the way, the trust and the life of Christ!

And every bit of those sacrifices have been worth it -- they have made me and hopefully you a much stronger and more faithful Christian!! So let us give thanks this day for the trust and sacrifice of St Stephen ... and the equal trust and sacrifice of all those Good Shepherds who have come to be known AS THE GOOD MOTHERS OF THIS EARTH!! For they have opened the gate to Jesus Christ -- And all who enter through that gate have eternal life ... and live A LIFESTYLE OF SACRIFICE because of it!!

AMEN

EASTER IV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 20, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHO WANTS TO BE SHEEP?"

And Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."
John 10:27-28

In America, when you want the truth ... the facts ... the real stuff, you all know what we do! We take a survey! We hand out a questionnaire, and of course, all the answers lead to the real stuff, the truth! Well, this week I did an official survey to get the truth about today's text. I contacted several of the children of the congregation and asked the following question: "If you could be any animal in the whole wide world, what would you most like to be?"

Well, here are some of the results of my survey: Sarah Martyn wants to be a "zebra" or maybe a "horse;" Ben Apgar definitely wants to be a "cheetah;" Heather Hemple is certain about being a "giraffe;" Rachel Johnson has very strong feelings about being a "dog;" Kris Oberdick is positive about being a "bobcat;" Tim Jensen desires to be a gorilla; and other favorites included cats, lions, bears, seals, dolphins, and even a monkey (amazing though - there wasn't one jackass or elephant in the bunch ... now that says something for both Republicans and Democrats). But, seriously, as you might guess -- not one of the children wanted to be a SHEEP! WHO WANTS TO BE SHEEP? NOBODY! NOHOW! NO WAY!

One other pastor recently took the same survey. The results were identical: NOBODY WANTED TO BE A SHEEP! And let's face it -- most adults have the same feelings as their children. We give animal names to our clubs like the elks, the lions, or the moose club -- but no one ever heard of the "lamb's lodge." The early American flag had a snake on it with the words, "Don't tread on Me." Needless to say, we told the world what we would be. We took the bald eagle as our national symbol; Russia took the bear ... England took the lion. Not even Israel wants to be characterized as a nation of sheep - they use the Star of David ... not the staff of David!

In 1967, William J. Lederer wrote "A Nation of Sheep" -- as might be expected, this was a totally negative notion of sheep. Americans were characterized as fair-weather citizens, as tranquilized by ignorance, as fearful to speak out on unpopular issues, as people who only serve if they receive some kind of financial security -- in short, as a "nation of sheep!" WHO WANTS TO BE SHEEP? Nobody!! Sheep are seen as weak, dirty, dependent, dumb, docile, and downright degrading! Call me anything, but not a sheep!

A Wyoming rancher once said that if sheep could find a way to commit suicide, they would do so regularly. They would kill themselves into extinction. No one wants to be labeled a "sheep." And let's face it -- "shepherd" is not much more popular!

Many of you remember a favorite T.V. series a few years back called "Candid Camera." On one of the segments, the camera was hidden while interviewing a young professional who had just finished his doctorate. He had taken a job-aptitude test, and was now receiving the results from the placement officer. As the camera zoomed into his face, he was told that the only occupation for which he was aptly suited was that of a "shepherd." You could imagine his shock and disbelief. And what did the rest of us do? We laughed and howled -- because anyone who wants to be a shepherd is a joke! That's what the world basically thinks of this profession called "ministry" -- it's a joke! It's a laugh! Is it any wonder that on favorite shows like "Mash" -- the clergy-types are always cast as impish, effeminate, wish-washy-mother hens?? We don't have much respect for sheep or shepherds in our real macho world!

Let's face it -- it's not fashionable to be a shepherd in this world! This world is one which has gone to the "dogs." Dogs are this world's best friends, not sheep! Sheep are of no value unless dead; at least then they can be eaten or worn! I mean let's face it -- sheep are so dull that we are told to count them in our sleep! Could anything be more passive; Sheep and Sominex are in the same class! And shepherds aren't much better off!

And yet with all this negative imagery -- Jesus calls us to be "sheep" and "shepherds." How can he do it!? How can he expect us to be labeled as "sheep" in a world which despises the critters! Is it any wonder the church has so many problems -- we've got the wrong marketing mentality! We're calling ourselves "sheep"... is it any wonder we're not popular? Let's get with it -- let's start calling ourselves Lions or Wolverines or Buckeyes ... maybe then we'll start getting a 100,000 here for worship! And shepherds -- what kind of role is that in a bullish market? You gotta have muscle and macho and meat in this world if you want to compete with the bears and bulls that are bred on the stock market floors! There's no place for shepherds or sheep in a dustless, microchip environment where my database rules supreme over your hard-disc software!

But Jesus will not be intimidated by this world's vision of truth and the real stuff! He still calls us to be sheep even in a highly technological society. Because to be "Christlike" -- to be Christian means that we are

always preparing ourselves for SLAUGHTER! Truth and real stuff in this world is "losing your life for the sake of others ... laying down your life as a sacrifice for the whole flock" - not just seeking one's own personal advantage! That's the truth of the Christian faith. And the imagery of "sheep" and "shepherd" beautifully illustrates this truth! To be a Christian is to be often on the table of sacrifice -- to be ridiculed ... rejected ... and often unwelcomed by the world. Yes, the ultimate life of faith was crucifixion as the Lamb of God!

Is it any wonder that St. Paul talked about this Christian life when he said: "five times I received 40 lashes less one; three times I was beaten with rods; I was stoned once, shipwrecked three times; I traveled continually endangered by floods, robbers, my own people, the gentiles; imperiled in the city, in the dessert, at sea by false brothers; enduring labor, hardship, many sleepless nights; in hunger and in thirst and frequent fastings, often cold and naked!" That's the life of the faithful Christian -- it's a life of a sheep ... constantly being sheared and slaughtered by the world!!

WHO WANTS TO BE SHEEP? Not many of us! But not only because of our images of "sheep" -- but also because of Jesus' image of sheep. His expectations of his followers was not to be a bunch of "dumb sheep" -- but a throng of faithful, dedicated and sacrificial followers ... who would even give up life for the sake of God's love! Is it any wonder that there are not 100,000 sheep in this fold today as there would be if Bo Shembechler were the "shepherd!" Being a sheep of Christ is not popular ... what's popular is watching the wolverines take on the buckeyes!

God's sheep and God's shepherds are very different from the expectations of the world. Is it any wonder that the Jews asked Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, then tell us plainly!" I sincerely hope you know what they wanted "of this Christ -- this Messiah?" It was the time of the Feast of Dedication -- this feast was a remembrance of the Maccabean Revolt. Judas Maccabeus led the Israelites in 164 B.C. against the Seleucids who had erected idols in the temple. The Maccabean Revolt was successful. And the Jews were looking for another Judas Maccabeus -- that's what they wanted their Messiah to be like. A strong, macho, invincible, iron-clad Messiah who would rule with military might!

Their vision of the Messiah is not much different from many of ours today. A recent poll of Americans determined that the most popular figures of our day are Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone. That was certainly confirmed in the recent election in Carmel-by-the Bay.

What kind of so-called "shepherds" do we want in this world? We want persons of malice, rancor, and reprisal -- persons who will shoot up the enemy and kill 'em dead -- persons who will not flinch one moment to use their machine guns to "mow them down!" And we call this the truth -- the real stuff of the world! This is what we emulate as the way, the truth and the life of the world! Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone are the shepherds of 20th century society!

Could anything more graphically say that we do not want to be the sheep of Jesus Christ?? We want to be seen as macho-men ... as hard-nosed people who will destroy anyone who dares step on our toes! Is it any wonder that there is so much cheering about our invasion into Libya this past week? It is the perfect fulfillment of our Sylvester Stallone "shepherd" mentality -- we love to be tough and triumphant! We love to flex our muscle and step on anyone who has threatened us!

Please don't get me wrong! Terrorism is a horrible crime against humanity! And maybe the only way terrorists will ever get the message is through our own form of terrorism! But what kind of action are we taking against other forms of "terrorism" - like the terrorism of "apartheid" in Africa? Bishop Holle so graphically described this terrorism for us on Thursday evening. Why aren't we attacking this evil system with our F-111's and our macho-muscle?? Why are we sitting back allowing these racist rulers to flourish?? We know the answer, don't we? We are attacking Libya (and not South Africa) because it better serves our own economic interests! We need Arabian oil -- and we're not going to let Khaddafi or anyone else stand in our way!

Again, I am not speaking against American interests. I understand that in this cold, cruel world we have to look out for ourselves. But the facts are that we pick and choose our battles not out of compassion ... not out of love and justice for the whole world, but strictly out of economic profitability! Let's at least tell the truth when we go in and attack anyone else in the world. Let's at least say that we're doing this "to serve our own interests." We are not doing this to "serve God" or His interests of peace and harmony on earth!

Whether we admit it or not -- we are God's people ... and God's people are sheep. That means they are often innocently slaughtered by mad-terrorists in the world. God hates that kind of innocent slaughter - regardless of who does it. But God does not fight terror with terror! He fights terror with love and forgiveness! Because these are the only powers that give hope and freedom to future generations.

Let's be honest -- there are sheep in this world ... and there are wolves in this world! And the popular roles

are played by the wolves of this world. In fact, it's great to be a BIG BAD WOLF in the world today. That's why we love Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone -- they have become the epitome of the Big Bad Wolf. Their mentality is "kill or be killed, destroy or be destroyed, damn or be damned!" Be macho like me and you will survive!

I'm glad that none of the children at Hope said they wanted to be a "big bad wolf." These children still want to be loved and forgiven. Even though they didn't say it, they want to be shepherded like sheep -- they want gentleness and love ... they want compassion and trust. I think if they really understood - they would rather be prodded by the staff of a shepherd than exterminated by the sub-machinegun of a Stallone.

That's why Jesus says, "My sheep listen to my voice; and I know them and they follow me." And WHO WANTS TO BE THESE SHEEP? Hopefully, all of us! According to the world's standards, we often live foolishly and stupidly -- because we live like Christ ... to love and sacrifice for others -- not merely for ourselves. But that's the way it is for SHEEP -- it has never been a popular way!

On a recent trip to the Middle East, J. B. Porter observed shepherds in the hills of Bashan. He said there were literally thousands of sheep and goats among the many shepherds. They were all mixed up -- thousands of them in dense, confused masses. Then the shepherds finished their fellowship and separated -- and each shepherd took a different path and gave a shrill peculiar call. Like clockwork, the mass of sheep swayed and moved like an internal convulsion. But within minutes, this convulsion was resolved into long, living streams of sheep following their shepherds along different pathways.

There is no greater security on earth than following the voice of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. For he is the only one that promises eternal life. And even amidst a world of terrorism, it is good to know that no one can snatch us from the hands of our eternal Father and Good Shepherd!

AMEN.

E A S T E R I V
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 24, 1988
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"W A N T E D : A G O O D S H E P H E R D"

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. He who is a hireling and not a shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ... I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me ... and I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd. John 10:11-13, 14-16

These numbers aren't very important to you. But they are very important to me. In fact, some of them are so important that my future security depends upon them.

For instance, the first number gives my lifetime identity as an employee in this country - my social security number. The second number gives me identity with the State of Ohio - my driver's license. The third number was my identity with the former LCA. The fourth gives me identity with Trustcorp. And on and on - identity with Standard Oil, identity with American Express, with the Lucas County Library, with Elder Beerman ... etc., etc. What would we do without numbers?

To live in this world is to be a real player of the numbers game. Day in and day out, all of us are often known only by numbers. Is it any wonder there is so much isolation and alienation in our society -- too often we're only known as a number.

Along comes Jesus Christ and says something so alien and out of touch with our statistical, numerical world: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd knows his own!" In a corporate, computerized, conglomerate cosmos -- what in the world is a good shepherd?? Of what value is a shepherd in a technological society where numbers and machines make all the difference?

Did you know that today machines can collect all the eggs from electronic henhouses? Did you know that today machines can translate a page of Russian into a page of English. Machines can now design in one hour a whole chemical plant that used to take a platoon of engineers a year to design. A machine today controls all the switches and signals for 35,000 miles of railroad track from a single remote-control center. Tomorrow morning a machine will determine how many hot dog buns a bakery driver will need to leave at the delicatessen if it's a rainy Monday morning. Of what value is a good shepherd in such a mechanized world?

No doubt about it -- numbers are necessary! Machines are mandated in this world! But what I still want ... and I hope what your still want is: A GOOD SHEPHERD! I want someone who

knows me for what I am. I want someone who loves me in spite of what I am. I want someone who will care for me regardless of what I have been or will become! I want someone who will stand by me and stand with me regardless of my past or my future!! I want A GOOD SHEPHERD ... even if good shepherding doesn't sound technologically sophisticated!

Recently, one of our members was advised by her local physician to get a second opinion at one of the best research centers in this general region. The family went there with great hope. Scads of X-rays and historical information were taken. All the necessary work-ups were completed. Finally, the day came when the patient was scheduled for the major personal consultation with the doctor just before surgery. The doctor walked into the room and said, "Now let's see ... who are you and why are you here anyway?"

That family quickly packed its bags and returned post haste to Toledo. The patient wanted to be treated as more than just another number ... more than just a piece of meat on some medical-surgical-assembly line. SHE WANTED TO BE KNOWN FOR WHO SHE WAS ... AND WHAT SHE WAS. SHE WANTED A GOOD SHEPHERD ... SHE WANTED MORE THAN SUPER-SURGEON ... SHE WANTED A SENSITIVE SURGEON ... A SHEPHERDING SURGEON! She wanted to be known as a real person with real feelings and real fears ... with real hurts and real hopes!

Is there still any doubt in anyone's mind about the WANT AD in today's bulletin? Good shepherd care is still very much a need in today's technological society. Because the first trait of any good shepherd is that he wants to know me as more than a number ... more than just another cog on a machine.

That's the good news of today's text: WE ARE MORE THAN NUMBERS ... MORE THAN JUST PIECES OF MEAT ON THE WORLD'S CONVEYOR BELT. WE ARE KNOWN INTIMATELY BY GOD. WE ARE HIS BELOVED SONS AND DAUGHTERS ... HIS GREATEST CREATIONS.

That's why baptism is so important to every child. Not only because it points us to God's salvation, but more importantly -- it graphically conveys that you and I are more than a number -- we are God's special children. Today, as we baptize Nicole and Amber -- they will forever know that they are very significant; very loved ... very much more than just another number in some church record book. They are God's loved & forgiven children!

That's also why this congregation has worked so hard in the past couple of years to get Zip Code fellowships going ... and to encourage name-tag Sundays ... and to take seriously a shepherding program for new families! Because God's people are to be known by him and each other ... that's the way they become more than just numbers to each other ... THEY ARE KNOWN AS REAL PEOPLE ... WITH REAL FEELINGS AND REAL FAITH AND REAL FEARS AND REAL FORTITUDE!

But there is more at stake here than just TALKING about good shepherding! In fact, if all we are here for today is just a lot of talking about shepherding ... then we are most to be pitied. Our reflections of A Good Shepherd must transcend talk ... for the greatest need of this society is an expression of LOVE THAT IS MORE THAN CHEAP TALK ... EMPTY WORDS! And that's especially why we call Jesus the Good Shepherd ... because his love was more than EASY WORDS ... "he laid down his life for his sheep:"

not because it was the profitable thing to do ...
not because it best served his interests ...
not because any of his sheep deserved it ...
not because it was the easy/comfortable thing to do;

BUT BECAUSE THAT'S THE WAY GOD LOVES ... HE GIVES HIMSELF TOTALLY! HE GIVES SACRIFICIALLY WITHOUT REGARD FOR WHAT HE'LL GET IN RETURN. The good shepherd gives because that's what shepherding is all about: GIVING, GIVING ... AND GIVING SOME MORE!!

The role of the shepherd is totally different from the role of the hireling! The hireling is reflective of far too many casual Christians in our culture. When a hireling sees danger, he runs ... he lets the wolf attack. Hirelings are not interested in the safety or well-being of the flock (Christian community) -- they are merely out to get their own ... to go after their own fare share!

Far too often too many people join churches as hirelings rather than shepherds. They join for what they can get instead of what they can give. They join only when things are going well ... as long as someone else has paid the mortgage ... as long as someone else carries the load! Hirelings are human saviors, interested in their own gain ... not the good of others. When bad times come, they run! They forget that discipleship is giving, not getting!

Can there be any doubt about today's WANT AD ... GOOD SHEPHERDS ARE DESPERATELY NEEDED IN THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST! People, who like Christ, choose to lay down their lives for others. People who are concerned for the whole flock, not only their own hides!

Like King Alphonso of Spain - Christ challenges every Christian to sacrifice for the whole flock ... sometimes even at great personal loss. King Alphonso's son had been captured as the Mohammedans sought to capture Spain's capital. With the king's son as hostage - the sultan ordered a gallows built in full view of the capital. The young prince was forced to stand under the words: "Alphonso, either the city or your son."

What a challenge for a father and leader. Do you give up your city and watch your enemy enslave your people? Or do you give up your son to keep your people free? With amazing speed, King Alphonso sent this message to the sultan: "Let my son die, that my people might live." I am the good shepherd ... the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Yes, good shepherds willingly sacrifice ... for the good of the whole flock. But they go even a step further: "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also and they will heed my voice." Good shepherds never claim a monopoly on the power of God -- they are God's advocates for inclusive flocks! Good shepherds recognize that their need is the same craving of every human: TO BE LOVED, GUIDED, CARED FOR AND FORGIVEN. Regardless of the color or character of the sheep - the Good Shepherd invites all into the sheepfold.

Your most recent Lutheran makes clear that the church has yet to learn this lesson of shepherding. The Milwaukee (Wis) congregation that recently rejected a black, female pastor by more than a 2/3 vote has made clear that the Lutheran Church is not yet a sanctuary (a safe place) for black sheep. Sadly, that congregation clearly shows that the democratic principle may be good politics, but poor Christianity. God's will is not merely a matter of the majority opinion! That congregation has reflected for America that the spirit of the church fails to transcend the spirit of the culture. The church has been shown as just another racist corporation!

Reminds me of the old devoted black man who applied for membership in a fashionable congregation like Hope. The pastor advised him to give further consideration to his intent. So the old man said he would go home and pray about it. When the pastor next saw the old black man, he asked: "What did the Lord tell you?" The old man responded: "The Lord told me it wasn't any use to join your church ... the Lord said he'd been trying to get into your church for ten years and still hadn't made it!

Good shepherding demands a power to love those who are different from ourselves. It's like Pastor Parkes Cadman said some time ago at a pastor's conference: "If you're trying to shut yourself behind denominational, or racial, or geographic, or social walls ... I suggest you climb up occasionally, and look over to see how many good people you have already shut out!" Our mission as good shepherds is not to shut out, but to open up the arms of Christ to the stranger, the naked, the nothings of this world. That good shepherding ministry always forces the church to reassess its mission and ministry ... even in regard to socially unacceptable people, like homosexuals. I will be sharing Bishop Chilstrom's letter and article with Lunches with Luther in the upcoming weeks. As we will learn -- there are no easy black and white answers regarding the inclusive nature of God's love!

One thing is for certain -- we have not succeeded in being an inclusive fellowship of Christ according to his shepherding standards. But we are not only exclusive sinners -- we have also made members of our own flock feel like numbers rather than intimate friends. And without a doubt, few of us have fulfilled the sacrificial challenge of true shepherding. So where does that leave us?? Right where we began! Still in need of A GOOD SHEPHERD!

As God's people, we want to be intimately loved ... we want others to sacrifice for us ... we want to be included among the loved and forgiven of the world. But so often we fail to do for others what we want others to do for us. We want our leaders, our heroes, our governing authorities, and most especially our pastors to be the perfect models of good shepherds, but we ourselves will not live by the principles we demand of them. In short, we so often WANT GOOD SHEPHERDING, without being good shepherds ourselves!

But with amazing grace, God comes through for us: he remains our Good Shepherd, even when we haven't been his good shepherds. Thanks be to God ... that he continues to answer our WANT AD! He continues to love, to forgive, to offer mercy and guidance even when we have failed. Without his good shepherding, we truly would be lost sheep!

AMEN.

EASTER IV (Annual Congregational Meeting)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 6, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"W A N T E D: ANOTHER GOOD SHEPHERD!"

"So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ... The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that (you) may have life, and have it more abundantly.'" John 10:8,10

One author has said that the "good shepherd" stopped being a popular image when we belatedly accepted the fact that sheep are dumb, not easily led, and smelly. That seems pretty appropriate to our age when our greatest aspirations are for intelligence, individualism, and good deodorants.

But the whole point of today's text was not to emphasize the nature of sheep, but rather that of good shepherding. All it presumes of sheep is that they have enough sense, at least, not to bite off the hand that feeds them.

Nevertheless, the sophisticated people that we are ... we do not like to be sheepishly beholden to anyone ... not even a shepherd like Jesus Christ. Our whole self-image and formation these days from womb to tomb is geared precisely to ward off any kind of strong dependence. Parents are engaged, unofficially, in a race to see whose kids will be the first out of the crib ... whose will be first on their feet ... whose will be first to sit on the potty chair ... and whose will be first to read Shakespeare before kindergarten. We learn the name of the game early in this age. When we're not beating our best friend out for a spot on the little league lineup, we're competing for the best grades in school. Obviously, it's important to be on the little league team and have high grades, but not at the expense of making our friends feel inferior.

The psychological model of the 90's has become: SELF-ACTUALIZATION. Right from the beginning of life these days, we must convince ourselves and everyone else that we are self-starters ... that we can get it all in gear without anyone else's help ... "mom and dad" get off my case, I'll do it all by myself. There was once a time when paternalism had some value; today that very word has become an anathema. Elders today are oft times viewed as oddballs or squares. Our goal is to be inner-directed persons ... people who form their opinions on every temporal and eternal issue ... people who consider it beneath their dignity to be guided or taught ... people who consequently don't much care what anybody else says or thinks. The dominant theme today is no longer "Father Knows Best," but rather "I Know Better Than Anyone Else!" No sheepish followers among the masses these days.

It's amazing, isn't it -- how much we humans love to perpetuate our own myths. Far from being self-starters in life, most of us can't get out of bed in the morning unless prodded by an alarm clock. Nor can many of us get to sleep

at night without the benefit of some kind of beverage or book or pill or program. My or my, aren't we in charge of our own destinies! Then between waking and sleeping -- we work at jobs provided by someone else. And which one of us hasn't heard about "networking" -- being certain that we build up a large enough network of friends in our business arena so that when we're terminated we'll have friends who will get us the next job. Whom are we kidding when we talk about being inner-directed, self-actualized individualists?? We're controlled by the "NETWORKS" around us!

After work, we depend upon movies, ideos, novels, and the TV Guide to tell us what to see and hear and read. We can't even go on vacation these days without having VCR's, boats, microwaves, washers & dryers ... all the latest conveniences right at our fingertips in order to enjoy our time away from home. If in doubt as to what to wear -- we simply copy our kids. But the biggest flimflam of self-actualization ... is the latest fad of individualized perfume that makes you smell your unique scent even if you didn't use it in the first place. Have you ever heard a greater contradiction of terms? Believe me ... if I didn't use deodorant and after-shave lotion ... I wouldn't want anyone smelling me the way I am uniquely in the first place.

As another author states -- "we're all about as self-directed as iron filings are to a magnetic field." Our jobs are not secure, our homes are mortgaged, our calendars are jammed to insanity, and we are not in control of the weather, our emotions, or our children. We can barely keep ourselves in coffee, to say nothing of feeding a hungry world. Whom do we think we're kidding when we ridicule our need for a Good Shepherd?

John's gospel asserts that there is a more abundant life than inner-direction or self-actualization. It is a life opened to us by the person of Jesus Christ. Only this Good Shepherd opens the door to a fully actualized, fully abundant life.

I believe that you and I are here today because we know deep down within ourselves that Wall Street hasn't really led us to the Abundant Life. It may have made us richer, but it hasn't made us better people. Many of us in Toledo this past year have become painfully aware that Corporate Raiders and other profit makers do not guarantee the abundant life. Instead of good shepherding, these thieves turn companies into prostitutes ... who will quickly abandon their loyal workers to any wolves simply to improve the perceived margin of profit. Likewise, we know that no matter how many degrees we possess, we still crave direction and guidance for our daily living. We know no matter how self-actualized we think we've become ... no matter how much technical sophistication we can boast of -- we still desperately need to be stimulated and forgiven by a wholly-other ... by a shepherding God.

What is most WANTED and NEEDED by all of us is truly a GOOD SHEPHERD. Someone whose GUIDANCE can always be trusted. Someone whose WORD is always faithfully uplifting and hopeful and life-giving. Someone whose DEEDS are not compromised by greed and self-glory, but offers security and salvation to all of us regardless of our special interest group. Someone whose LOVE and ACCEPTANCE is guaranteed in spite of my faults and failures. Someone whose MERCY and COMPASSION is never ending, even when excommunication is fully deserved. History has not postulated a better example of that SOMEONE than a Good Shepherd named Jesus of Nazareth.

We come here week after week to be fed by that Good Shepherd ... to be guided by his teachings and example ... to be inspired by his character and compassion ... to be renewed by his love and mercy ... to be claimed by his forgiveness and freedom. I sincerely hope and pray that you have seen some of his qualities in my life as your pastoral shepherd. I certainly give thanks for your willingness and commitment to follow his example and share his shepherding life with me.

And now ... especially after nine months of searching for another leader in this example ... I beg for your prayers and shepherding support. There is a great shortage of young people today who want to emulate this Good Shepherd's life and ministry. We are training our young to ridicule the lifestyle of this Good Shepherd. By the example we set, we are telling them that you're only living the abundant life if you're seeking huge salaries rather than offering human sacrifices. We are telling our children to pursue social status and forget about social ministry to the needy. We are instructing our youth to only open those doors which lead to social prestige and self-glory and forget about those doors that render service and loving kindness to our society. Is it any wonder that Jesus alludes in this text to the fact that the principalities and powers of this world only come to steal, destroy, and kill the spirit of his sheep.

Dear friends in Christ -- when you have a chance, tell your sons and daughters, tell your friends, tell the children of this world that there is a better door to the abundant life than the popular and prestigious doors propagated by our world. Tell them to enter by the door of this Good Shepherd and they will really experience the life of love and laughter, the life of kindness and compassion, the life of giving unto others as they have first received. Tell them that they will finally know the meaning of the abundant life -- that it's a life of caring about people rather than being carried away by things.

And while you're at it -- tell them that Peter Martyn is desperately seeking their partnership in this sheepfold. Tell them that there's always a WANTED sign on the front door of this household. Tell them that there is no greater reward than serving as ANOTHER GOOD SHEPHERD of Hope Church.

Tell them there is no greater joy than loving and laughing, than learning and lingering with the children and youth of this sheepfold. Tell them there is no greater pleasure than cajoling and consoling, than hugging and holding the sheep of this fold, who do not seek their own glory but the greater glory of God. Tell them that there is no more profound life than celebrating the joys and laughter ... the sorrow and tears of some 1,375 precious saints who are by no means ever to be classified as dumb sheep! Tell them there is no more abundant life to be found in this world than the one shared at 2201 Secor Road.

And one more thing -- if they are interested in SERVING AS ANOTHER GOOD SHEPHERD ... tell them to call Collect!

AMEN.

EASTER IV

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

So Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. ... if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. John 10:9-10

"OPEN THE DOOR TO LIFE!"

In medieval Europe, devout workmen organized themselves into guilds. Each guild was comprised of skilled artisans from a certain craft or trade. These men were dedicated to high standards of workmanship ... but also dedicated to high standards of personal integrity. The tools of their trade -- namely, the plumb, the level, the square, and the compass -- came to have the spiritual meanings of truth, fairness, and honesty. Eventually, these guilds became the forerunners of the Modern Order of Free Masons. As we all know, Masons to this day treasure this heritage of high standards and degrees of achievement.

Why do I mention all of this on this Mother's Day -- to say nothing of Jesus' identification as the "door of the Kingdom." Well, for members of the early Carpenters' Guilds, Jesus' words "I am the door" came to have very special meaning. Doors became spiritual symbols. Guildsmen deliberately CONSTRUCTED DOOR PANELS IN THE FORM OF CROSSES. Thus, one of the constant reminders for these workers in their craft was the passion of Jesus Christ.

Just look around the "old doors" of this church -- every one of them is paneled into a "cross." Take a deeper look at old homes and you will see the same thing -- the doors paneled into crosses -- A CONSTANT REMINDER THAT THE TRUE DOOR TO LIFE IS JESUS CHRIST.

Isn't it sad that we have lost that "touch of the craftsman" today. Most modern doors are plain ... there is no identification with Christ. In many ways that truly symbolizes our world -- there is a plurality of doors to choose from in today's world. No longer is Jesus Christ viewed as the true way, the true life, and the true entrance into the Kingdom of God. He is viewed as just one of many options.

Well, thankfully, those of us who are here this morning do not agree with that pluralistic assessment. For us, Jesus Christ is still "the door" to life. We have come to see that there is no perfect "road to success;" we have come to realize that there is no absolute "door to material abundance;" and that leads to the realization that the

ultimate door must be one of compassion, servanthood, and forgiving love for one another ... AND THAT DOOR IS NONE OTHER THAN THE ONE OPENED BY JESUS CHRIST. For his door leads us to the true life ... the true love ... the true expression of happiness and wholeness and forgiving satisfaction.

But this text from John urges us to be careful about our identification of his door. First, the door is not identified as Lutheran, Methodist, Roman Catholic or any other denomination. If what you see when you enter the doors of this church is only "Lutheran" - then we are failing in our mission. Because our mission is to reflect the life of Jesus Christ and him alone. That's why the doors of this church are painted red ... to symbolize that this place uplifts the sacrifice of Christ. And those that dare enter this place BETTER BE PREPARED TO DO A LOT OF LIVING AND SACRIFICING FOR CHRIST.

In these days of the PTL scandal, we have seen graphically what happens when the hunger for human prominence and power is painted over the door of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ becomes identified in terms of worldly pomp and glorified ratings. But Jesus Christ will not allow those who seek their own glory to seduce him or the faithful from the cross. Faithfulness is not lived in the comfort of living room religion -- it is the daily and weekly giving of time, talent and treasure to the lost, the least, and the lonely of the world. And that's why you have come to this place -- because here is the "door" to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ ... not some multi-million dollar recording studio and amusement park.

But now that you have found the door -- is anything else necessary?? Jesus says, the true sheep of the fold "go in" -- they go beyond the door. The greatest thing about the door of Christ is that it is always open -- it is never locked, it never selectively excludes anyone, it is never a dead end, nor does it ever imprison you once you have entered. No one has ever entered the "true door of Christ" and become a victim of any kind of abuse or scandal. There is only thing offered beyond the entrance -- constant support and nourishment!

That's why Christ beckons us through the door -- not so that we can passively watch someone else perform on television. But so that we will become living and growing participants in his way, his truth, and his life. That's the whole purpose of "COMING THROUGH THE DOOR" -- so that we will become living participants. It's not enough to find the door; we are called to become enlightened and energized within the fold.

That's why the pastoral and educational staff at Hope

has been so committed to a multitude of adult learning opportunities -- BECAUSE FAITHFULNESS IS ENTERING THROUGH THE DOOR AND BECOMING A LIVING ADVOCATE OF CHRIST'S LIFE. And the only way that we can truly become FAITHFUL is through constant dialog and learning with each other. Christ beckons us "to come in and learn with him."

But that learning is not an end in itself. We do not learn of the sacrifice and significance of Christ merely for personal edification. WE LEARN IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT LIVE ACCORDINGLY. Or in the words of Christ himself, after we have "come in," we are to "go out and give what we have received." That's what Christ does for us once we have "come to feast with him." He energizes us to go out and share the nourishment that we have received.

And that's where the "door of Christ" most resembles the way of motherhood. Who was it that brought you to the "door" of Jesus Christ? Who was it that modeled the way, the truth, and the life of Jesus Christ? Who encouraged you to enter into the shepherding arms of Jesus in Sunday School? Who was it that urged you to enter the sheepfold even against the will of the so-called "head of the household." Who was it that taught you the 23rd Psalm -- and reminded you to say your prayers before bedtime? Who was it that scrubbed you on Saturday night so that you'd look clean and fresh for Sunday morning?

Maybe you didn't have that kind of mother. I'm sorry if that was the case -- you missed out on a very special relationship with both mother and Jesus. I did have that kind of a mother. She never missed an opportunity to show me the door of Jesus Christ. She never backed down once when I resisted church or Sunday School -- she lovingly but firmly showed me the way, the truth, and the life of Christ. In short, she OPENED THE DOOR TO LIFE ... the real life, the real love, the real truth, the real peace that passes all human understanding, the real life that can never be taken away from Peter ... not even by his own death.

It was from my mother that I learned the real way and truth of sharing with the poor. My mother, like Jesus, OPENED THE DOOR TO LIFE for the poor, the hungry, the homely, the hurt and humiliated. If my mother ever heard me laugh or ridicule a handicapped or hungry person -- she would firmly demand that I apologize to said person. The door to Jesus Christ did not allow me to "get by" feeling superior or selfish. The "door of Christ" merely showed me the way I was to give myself and my belongings to help those less fortunate than me.

Likewise, it was from my mother that I learned the real truth and life of kindness and love, rather than

bulliness and macho mania. My mother, like Jesus, OPENED THE DOOR TO LIFE by being an ever-present advocate for peace and justice. She would not allow my big brother to beat the tar out his little brother -- he had a four-year growth advantage. She would not allow loaded guns in our city home -- they were only to be shot in the woodlands on the farm. She would not allow her boys to think that the "commies" were the only bad guys in the world -- she understood that all mankind was sinful, destructive and unclean (even though she always said the commies were the worst).

Yes, it was from my mother that I learned the importance of kneeling at the altar of the Lord. Because my mother, like Jesus himself, was committed to OPENING THE DOOR TO A FORGIVING LIFE. Because she knew she had been forgiven, she wanted that life to always be present and uplifted in my life.

Need I say anything more!! I thank God today for showing us the WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST. He is the door to a fuller and richer life of peace, love and human satisfaction. But I wouldn't have known about that door IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR MY MOTHER. And I can only believe the same is true for many of you.

SO TODAY, I ALSO SAY THANKS BE TO GOD FOR ALL OF YOU MOTHERS, WHO CONTINUE TO SHOW YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS THE WAY TO THE DOOR OF JESUS CHRIST! There is no better way, no better truth, or no better life of motherhood!!

AMEN.

EASTER IV (GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY / MOTHER'S DAY)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 10, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE"

So the Jews said: "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."
Jesus answered: "I have told you, and you do not believe. The WORKS that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me." John 10:24f

Susan and I met in 1968 in Chicago. We were married in 1969 in Minneapolis/St. Paul. But we didn't become a mother and father until 1974 in Troy, MI. Between 1969 and 1974, there was a lot of talk. Talk, talk, and more talk. And the talking had one primary focus: TO BE OR NOT TO BE A MOTHER AND FATHER - THAT WAS THE QUESTION. But since 1974 - we have learned graphically that talking about being a mother and father was very different from BEING A MOTHER AND FATHER (as Jeff Silleck and Jim Walter have learned in recent times). Like the good professor that she is, it was easy for Susan to offer advice and counsel about motherhood before becoming a mother; and it was equally simple for me to pontificate upon fatherhood before becoming a father. But once Angela arrived - and Sarah seven years later - then we knew the real meaning of: TO BE OR NOT TO BE A MOTHER OR FATHER. So it is on this Mother's Day that we reach one clear conclusion from this sermon: Motherhood (fatherhood) is a lot more than talking about parenting or discussing child rearing; it IS the tough stuff of BEING GOOD PARENTS ... it is not talking about, BUT LIVING THE WAY AND BEING THE WAY OF GOOD SHEPHERDS.

As Dr. Jay Rochelle made clear in a recent article on "Spirituality" in THE LUTHERAN: "One can be a Buddhist without having much to do with Buddha, because Buddha simply taught a way of life. But Jesus did not merely teach a way of life; he WAS and STILL IS that way of life; HE IS THE LIFE."

TO BE OR NOT TO BE a mother, or father, or good shepherd is not merely a matter of teaching or talking about a way of life -- RATHER, IT IS BEING THAT WAY ... LIVING THAT WAY! That's why Jesus says so clearly in today's gospel: "The works (not the talkings or the teachings) that I do in my Father's name testify to me." That's what makes HIM the Good Shepherd. Obviously, Jesus taught the WAY of shepherding; but he did much more! He did not merely talk or teach about THAT WAY - HE WAS THAT WAY, THAT TRUTH, AND THAT LIFE OF GOD. Unlike all other religions - Christianity does not merely give us a Good Teacher; it gives us the GOOD SHEPHERD - the perfect model ... the one who takes the lead and asks us to follow the same way!

In reflecting upon the difference between BEING THE WAY and TALKING ABOUT THE WAY, I am reminded of the conversation I overheard this week at a restaurant. Two persons were talking very loudly about last week's gospel text; how Thomas only believed after seeing. It was very obvious that they wanted

everyone in the restaurant to be impressed with their devout theological sincerity and sophistication (nauseating). They definitely wanted to be HEARD and SEEN. After some 35 minutes of their litany of self-righteousness, it finally came time to pay the bill. You wouldn't have believed how they debated and disputed as to which part of the bill each one owed. All their impressive theological talk was just that - A LOT OF HOT AIR! For now their actions were speaking much louder than their words: THEY HAD NOT YET LEARNED TO LIVE GRACIOUSLY, GIVINGLY, GENEROUSLY, AND GRATEFULLY! They illustrated graphically the difference between "talking about faith" and being willing to "pay the price of faith."

And that's why Good Shepherd Sunday is so appropriate on Mother's Day! Because like no other shepherds, good mothers learn better than most of us that there's a big difference between talking about motherhood and paying the price of motherhood. Three brief but telling points can illustrate the great similarities between the Good Shepherd and good mothers.

First and foremost, TO BE A GOOD SHEPHERD ... AND A GOOD MOTHER - you cannot waste time talking about servanthood, YOU SIMPLY BECOME A SERVANT OF OTHERS! That's the essence of the job description: SERVANTHOOD! Jesus did not waste his time talking about servanthood, he simply served ... "he laid down his life for the sheep." And he said, "if others won't follow that example, then shake off the dust and move on ... but don't try to pamper people who won't pay the price of good shepherding!"

As one commentator says about this day: "parenting and shepherding are leading by example." He continues: "our children can never be what they haven't seen; but they will become what they have seen!" And what have they seen a lot of these days? The commentator tells of a Sarasota couple who recently made the papers for instructing their teenage sons about the ins and outs of the family business - armed robbery. The couple thoroughly schooled their sons in the tools of the trade: AK-47 assault rifles, police scanners, escape routes, surveillance methods, survival gear, and disguises. They showed their children the techniques of hand to hand combat and expected their teenage boys to memorize police codes and map layouts (and we balk when asked to memorize a few Bible verses). After each robbery, the boys were totally debriefed and their mistakes were corrected.

Those parents were far more serious about training for crime than most Christian parents are about training for Christlike service. Those two misguided parents knew that if their children were to succeed at armed robbery, they needed the very best modeling and guidance. And we wonder why we have riots in L.A. and racism in every other city of America! BECAUSE THAT'S THE MODEL AND THE TRAINING OF OUR CULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY. Day after day after day - our kids see street violence, and sexual promiscuity and perversion, and drug & alcohol addiction, and family alienation and separation, and filthy, degrading talk!

As the commentator said: "the child does not emulate what the shepherd says, but rather what the shepherd does." Or as Jesus said: "You will know them by their fruits." If a child has never seen mom and dad embrace, how can we expect an embracing child? If a child has never seen mom and dad pray, how can we expect a prayerful child? If a child has never seen mom or dad speak out for justice and truth, how can we expect a child to stand up for justice and truth!?!

Some of the members of Hope have probably more than once said: "Look at that silly senior Pastor Martyn - he's wearing an apron. You can be assured - it's not because I have a sexual identity problem. It's because GOOD SHEPHERDS, just like good mothers/good fathers, first and foremost MODEL A ROLE OF SERVING OTHERS. That's a model I learned from my good shepherd, my mother. She did not talk about serving, SHE SERVED ... SHE LAID DOWN HER LIFE FOR OTHERS! That's what the word "minister" means - to serve, to wait on tables, to get your hands dirty by helping others. I must make an honest confession - some days around here I feel there are very few who willingly wear the apron. Or to put it more bluntly - some days it feels like there are a lot more DUMB SHEEP than GOOD SHEPHERDS in this place. But then God blesses us with better days - like recently at the Pancake Supper Lenten series, the Super Sale & Senior Prom, the Annual Meeting and hopefully, the Debt Free in '93 campaign. Those are the moments that inspire me to put the apron on again ... because we have finally become what God wants us to be ... a body of good shepherds, SEEKING TO SERVE, RATHER THAN BE SERVED. Like those special times for mothers - those are the times of ecstatic joy that keep servants going. Yes, good mothering & good shepherding means modeling SERVANTHOOD THAT CAN BE SEEN!

But secondly - TO BE A GOOD SHEPHERD, AND A GOOD MOTHER -- LOVING LIKE JESUS IS MORE THAN A LINE OF SPIRITUAL LINGO! I'm reminded of the mother who took her 6-yr-old son to a doctor's waiting room. As they waited, he talked on and on about every subject under the sun. To the wonder of everyone in the room, the mother kept answering him patiently and caringly. Finally, he got around to God. He had many "whys" and "hows" about God, but at last asked: "Why doesn't God ever get tired and just quit?" And his mom answered: "Because God is love -- and love never gets tired and just quits!"

How tempting it must have been for Jesus to get tired and just quit! Especially those last hours in Gethsemane - those moments with the disciples were the true test to the limits. And which mother or father has not been equally tested to those limits?!? BUT LOVE MEANS NOT GETTING TIRED & QUITTING! And that's the challenge of being a Christian mother/father - not just talking about love, but living it!

I'm reminded of the kindergarten class that was learning the 23rd Psalm. The teacher, Mrs. Murphy, was having the class go over and over their recitation for their year-end program. But she kept on hearing one voice that seemed to muffle the same line. Finally, she isolated the problem.

One little boy was boldly reciting what he thought was the proper verse: "Surely good Mrs. Murphy will follow me all the days of my life."

That little boy had experienced LOVE from Mrs. Murphy that never got tired or just quit. That kind of love isn't learned by hearing it talked about once or twice a year. That kind of love must be demonstrated from the beginning to the ending of life. It begins with Baptism. The pastor says: "In Christian love, you have presented this child for Holy Baptism ... you should therefore FAITHFULLY BRING him to God's house ... TEACH him the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the 10 Commandments ... PLACE IN HIS HANDS the Holy Scriptures ... AND PROVIDE ONGOING INSTRUCTION in the faith. Do you hear those WORDS OF ACTION -- bring, teach, place, provide ... those are the ongoing actions of love! That's the lifestyle of the a good shepherd & a good mother: LIVING A LOVE THAT DOESN'T GET TIRED AND JUST QUIT!

Finally - TO BE A GOOD SHEPHERD AND A GOOD MOTHER ... you cannot merely talk about forgiveness, but must facilitate forgiveness every opportunity that is offered. The 23rd Psalm says: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies." Every Sunday (hopefully) the Good Shepherd prepares his table of forgiveness in the presence of his enemies. For Judas was not the only one who denied and betrayed Jesus and then departed from the Last Supper. All have denied and deserted the Master ... each of us in this room!! In fact, in recent weeks ... I have heard the words of denial and desertion! Like today, the table of forgiveness is prepared ... and like Judas, some disciples are saying: "He's asking too much of us - to be forgiven too often ... or others say, it takes too much time to have supper with Jesus every week." Not only Judas was at odds with God; each of us in our own way has breached God's trust and each others. And this Good Shepherd ... just like every good mother ... will not tolerate an atmosphere of enmity and alienation. He invites us to come to HIS TABLE ... the table he has prepared for us to end all hostility, all resentment & all impure thoughts.

Is it any wonder that our mothers (and fathers) keep on preparing a table for us even when we have denied and betrayed them?? THAT IS THE ONLY WAY TO PEACE AND RECONCILIATION - to gather round the table... whether it's here at Hope or in our homes. But to gather and receive the love of the Good Shepherd who has laid down his life SO THAT WE MIGHT BE FORGIVEN ... and then become servants of THAT SAME LOVE AND FORGIVENESS IN THIS HUNGRY & HURTING WORLD!

AMEN.

EASTER IV
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 24, 1994
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GOOD SHEPHERDS #TOUGH-MINDED, TENDER-HEARTED"

Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'" John 10:11

Good Shepherd Sunday - always the 4th Sunday of Easter; always the day Christians remind themselves of their Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ; and that they have been called as Christians to shepherd in His image.

The question is: what is your image of the Good Shepherd? I would venture to bet that more than 90% of us here today have the same image of the Good Shepherd as the one painted by Germany's Bernard Plockhorst.

How many of you have ever seen this before?
How many would say that this is your image
of the Good Shepherd?

Well, this is the image that was given to me in SCS and even into early adulthood: a very pastoral Jesus; always warm and cuddly with his lambs; very gentle and quiet; almost having no connection to the real world of chaos, confusion & complications. My "Good Shepherd" was a Jesus of a long-forgotten day that had little or no relevance to the realities of daily living in 1990's.

Regretably, this is still the Jesus that some children get in SCS. Look at this more modern rendering of Jesus drawn by Herb Beecroft. This is not the Good Shepherd of the Bible; this is a romanticized Good Shepherd that every teen-age girl would love to be her escort to the prom. How tragic that we have made Jesus into a "pretty boy." And then we wonder when our teen-age children get older and go to college and get their first jobs "why they don't want to be believers anymore!" Well - when you give a society a "weak and impotent image of Jesus" ... then when the times get tough, they no longer turn to that Good Shepherd because they never learned that he could handle difficult times.

But the real Jesus, the real Good Shepherd of the Bible was a very down-to-earth caretaker as well as an earthly example of his heavenly Father. The Jesus of the Bible knew that his disciples would not be meandering around in green pastures most of the time; he knew that true disciples would be facing a difficult and hostile world, where daily they would be confronted by cold and arrogant people whose hearts had been hardened by "wheeling and dealing with corruption in a sinful society." John tells us in today's text that this "good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." What does that really mean? Well, let's listen to Matthew's interpretation of what it means "to lay down your life:" "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as

doves." Matthew defines good shepherding by using contrasting images: good shepherds are TOUGH like serpents but also SOFT like doves. Or as today's sermon title suggests: GOOD SHEPHERDS ARE "TOUGH-MINDED" BUT AT THE SAME TIME "TENDER-HEARTED!" Most of us do pretty well with the "tender-hearted" side of Jesus; but many of us have forgotten the "tough-minded" side.

In fact, Plockhurst's portrait almost causes us to totally forget about Jesus' "tough-mindedness." That's where symbols can sometimes be very dangerous. That's why minorities all over the world have sometimes been very upset with our white theology; we've not only made Jesus into a "white European," we've sometimes even made him into a mamby-pamby, pretty-white-boy. The Bible makes clear his ministry was characterized by incisive thinking, realistic accountability, and decisive judgment. This tough-minded shepherd had a strong, austere quality that made for firmness of purpose and solidness of commitment.

And so it was that when Jesus was confronted by temptation, he responded with tough, decisive language: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test ... Away with you Satan, for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him!'" How much our world and esp. parents today need to remember this tough-minded Jesus. We are so tempted to never say "No" ... forgetting that saying "Yes" all the time means that we have "given in" to other gods.

When a man came to Jesus desiring to be a devout follower, Jesus answered: "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." That's tough-minded shepherding. So often today we are so anxious to get people into the church that we'll tell them anything they want to hear. But rarely do we tell them that following Jesus is not an easy ride of comfort and pleasure.

And then there's that really tough-minded exhortation: "I have not come to bring peace but a sword; for I have come to set a man against his father, and daughter against her mother ... for he/she who loves parents more than me is not worthy of me." Tell me now: IS THIS NOT TOUGH-MINDEDNESS!? Obviously, Jesus is not urging children to rebel against parents, but he is reminding everyone THAT OUR HIGHEST ALLEGIANCE AND OBEDIENCE IS TO GOD, AND GOD ALONE! For that same reason Jesus decisively clears out the moneychangers from the temple FOR THEY HAVE TURNED God's house into just another commercial enterprissee where bowing down to profits had become their diety RATHER THAN KNEELING BEFORE THE LORD THEIR MAKER.

Then there are the multitude of words during that last week, where Jesus says "one of you will betray me," and they deny it, but then betray him. And that night in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he agonized over the "cup of suffering," yet decisively accepted the will of his Father.

Much as Jesus himself became the suffering servant, he called for that same tough-mindedness from his disciples, telling them: "that whoever would be first among you must be a servant, for the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and offer his life as a ransom for others," and again telling them, "to take up their cross and follow him." As Jesus made crystal clear: those of the kingdom "don't put their hands to the plow and then look back regretting that decision." Like their Lord, they never give up even in the midst of adversity ... they look to a future where the world becomes a better place because of their tough-minded and decisive shepherding.

Maybe that's why we need to remember former Pres. Nixon with the gracious goodness of God today: as a tough-minded leader who suffered from an insecurity that caused him a tragic downfall; but also a leader who decisively fought his way back from depression to envision a promising future for himself and his country - seeking to continue to offer a word of goodness & wholeness to his fellow Americans.

I wish I could go on with many other sayings & applications of Jesus which clearly reveal him as a tough-minded shepherd. But I have been cautioned to limit my sermons to 15 minutes; so to show my tender-heartedness as well as tough-mindedness, I'd better get on and confirm what most of us know best: that while Jesus was tough-minded, HE WAS ALSO VERY TENDER-HEARTED. For in this regard we all know that toughmindedness without tenderheartedness is cold and detached; we've all known people who have risen to the height of toughmindedness only to have sunken into the passionless depths of hardheartedness!

So, totally contrary to the bias of his society and many times of our own -- Jesus said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of God!" Jesus wanted every child in the world to know that he/she is loved and forever forgiven by God the Father. That's why we practice infant baptism as Lutherans. Maybe it isn't the purist practice of sacramental perfection of the early church. But if Lutherans are going to error, they will err on the side of grace. BECAUSE ABOVE ALL -- THE LAST THING WE WANT TO REMEMBER AS WE LEAVE WORSHIP IS THAT OUR LORD IS A GOD WHO IS TENDER-HEARTED ... WHO FORGIVES US EVEN WHEN WE FALL SHORT OF HIS TOUGH-MINDED COMMANDS FOR OUR DAILY LIVING.

Yes, good-shepherding especially shows tender-hearted compassion for the lost and the lonely and the lessor and the least and the almost forgotten. That's why Jesus could patiently feed 5000 even when his disciples wanted him to tell the crowds to go home. That's why Scripture is full of miraculous accounts of Jesus' healing lepers and women -- two of the most despised groups of his society -- BECAUSE JESUS HAD COMPASSION UPON ANY ONE WHO NEEDED HELP. Jesus knew that there comes a time in all persons' lives where they can't pull themselves up by their own bootstraps -- they need a tender-hearted good shepherd to get them back on the road again.

And what greater example of God's grace could ever be given than the story of the woman caught in adultery. Here we hear the eptiome of Jesus' tender-heartedness: "Let him who is without sin be the first to cast a stone!" And then he turned to her and said, "Woman, has no one condemned you ... well, neither do I; now go and sin no more!" This is the same tender-heartedness that finds our Lord in the midst of his agony on the cross saying, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing!" The Good Shepherd shares no greater power of God than the ultimate divine power: FORGIVENESS; and he commissions each of us to offer this power of good shepherding each and every time we have the opportunity.

Yes, it was this same tender-heartedness that moved a very tough-minded and strong-willed Lord to break down and weep over the death of his beloved friend, Lazarus. Nothing speaks more directly to our day than this kind of example: a shepherding which calls for toughness and decisiveness when it comes to separating lustiness from loftiness in living, but yet maintains a merciful and forgiving heart for those who have been lost to lust or any other sinful power of this world. Good shepherds always have a heart that despises the sin but offers open arms to the sinner.

Which leads to the final words always given by this good shepherd no matter what the circumstance: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives ... for my peace is the everlasting love of the Father." And so it is that he asked Peter: "Do you love me," and Peter said, "Lord you know that I love you." And then Jesus said, "Then feed my sheep!"

And so today he asks you and me again: "Do you love me?" And, like Peter, we respond: "Lord you know that we love you!" So he says: "Then REMEMBER TO ALWAYS BE GOOD SHEPHERDS who feed my sheep with the tough-mindedness and tender-heartedness of God himself!"

AMEN.

Easter IV (Good Shepherd Sunday)
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
May 7, 1995
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"IN SEARCH OF A GOOD SHEPHERD!"

I am the good shepherd. ... I know my own and my own know me ... and they hear my voice and follow me ... And I lay down my life for the sheep.

A new kind of super jet was on an experimental flight. It was full of reporters and journalists. After takeoff, the captain's voice was heard over the speakers: "I'm delighted to be your pilot and the captain of this historical flight. All is going well, except that I have to tell you about a minor inconvenience: you passengers on the right side will notice out the window that the closest engine is vibrating. Do not fear, we have three other engines so you are perfectly safe. And we are at the unbelievable altitude of 62,000 feet traveling at 1,050 mph as planned. However, if you're looking at the other right engine, you will note that it is glowing .. or more precisely, one could say -- burning. But don't worry, since there are two other engines on the left side, we have maintained our altitude and speed.

Now, those of you sitting on the left side should not worry if you've noticed that one of the engines has been missing for about ten minutes; somehow or other, it fell off. And regrettably, I must call your attention to another detail that appears to be a bit more serious. Along the aisle, through the whole plane, a crack has developed. In fact, some of you may be looking through the crack this very moment and seeing the Atlantic Ocean. Well, for those of you who have good eyes, you will notice a small life raft that has been thrown out of the plane. Well, ladies and gentlemen, your captain is speaking to you from that life raft!"

None of us would feel too secure on that kind of flight. But to translate that reality into today's image would be to say that "there were many sheep on that plane without a good shepherd." And as I suggested in Larson Hall on Palm Sunday in my shepherding presentation -- there are a lot of sheep "on the ground today" without a good shepherd in this world. We wonder why so many tragic events and so much violence keeps getting reported each day. The answer may sound oversimplified, but nevertheless it is true: **many of these sheep have become violent wolves because they were raised without shepherding care!**

As I suggested in that presentation on April 9th -- the greatest fear of any child is that his/her parents will "abandon ship!" The worst tragedy for any child is to grow up separated from "loving and merciful care" - from good shepherding. Nothing threatens a child more when he/she has misbehaved than to hear from his/her parents: "If you do that again, I'm going to leave you!" And yet we live in a world where separation between parents and children is rampant! Over and over again when teens get into trouble and they are asked why did you do what you did, the answer is often: "Nobody really cares about me, so why should I care about anyone else?" How can a 22-yr old man blow up a Federal Bldg and show almost no remorse for this horrible destruction? There can only be one answer: that young man lived 22-years without the benefit of a good shepherd! In a world where divorce and adultery and drunkenness and doing-your-own-thing have become the acceptable standards of society -- we have a culture of children who are feeling that the "captain has abandoned the flight" ... that they are sheep

without a shepherd!

Is it any wonder that I have entitled this sermon by the same title of my Larson Hall presentation: "In Search of A Good Shepherd!" And whether we were brought up in the ancient rural world of Israel or the great metropolis of Toledo -- we all know the qualities of a Good Shepherd: **someone** whose guidance can be trusted ... **someone** whose word is always uplifting and life-giving ... **someone** whose deeds are not compromised by greed and self-glory ... **someone** whose love and acceptance is guaranteed in spite of our faults and failures. And where do we find that **SOMEONE**? In no other place than the Church of Jesus Christ! The search need go no further because the Son of God and his Good Shepherds fulfill all the qualities that the world is seeking.

First, unlike the pilot or so many parents today -- instead of "bailing out" when the going got tough, Jesus became one of us so that he might intimately know and empathetically understand us. **Jesus became the lamb in order to change the lives of the sheep.**

Our text today says: "I know my own and my own know me ... and they hear my voice and they follow me." If God had stayed in the heavens there would never have been such intimacy between the shepherd and the sheep. But just like a real shepherd, we know Jesus' voice because he became intimately **one with us -- he came to know our struggles and our hurts and our fears and our disappointments.** Because when the shepherd intimately talks to his sheep regularly (at least once a week on Sunday), then they know his voice and distinguish it from all the other conflicting voices in the world. That was graphically illustrated in an English courtroom by two gentry who both claimed **ownership of several stray sheep recently. To settle the dispute, the judge ordered that the sheep be brought into the witness room and kept on a lightly held leash. In the courtroom, the judge asked each defendant to call the sheep. Several times the first gentry voiced sheep calls. The sheep didn't budge from the witness room. Then the second gentry let loose with a guttural call. The sheep came bounding into the courtroom with leash and all. The judge concluded: "True sheep always know the voice of their shepherd." Jesus has not abandoned us in the least; he is beckoning more desperately today than ever to come and listen and follow.**

But he not only "came to be one of us," he also became the lamb who died for us in order that we might have "new life" with God and each other. Unlike the jet captain or many CEO's of this world, Jesus did not come into this world **TO TAKE CONTROL OVER THOSE WHO WERE HIS SHEEP.** That's the kind of Messiah the ancient Israelites were expecting -- a political/military messiah. When Christians confuse their faith with politics, then we begin to think the church should dictate the qualities of presidents - namely, someone who will lead us to the green pastures of economic security and walk us through the valley of death with war machines and techno power. But the Good Shepherd known as Jesus Christ was not a wolf or lion who sought to steal or take control with **POWER OVER HIS PEOPLE OR ANY OTHER PEOPLE!**

This shepherd in total contrast to the secular world dies for his sheep to show his total commitment to them. In his death, he actually shows a **LIVING**

CONNECTION -- that "new life" comes through giving up control and through a willingness to sacrifice for the lost and the least and the lonely. This Good Shepherd offers a radically new model for the world to follow: ONLY THROUGH DYING TO SELF GLORY CAN THE WORLD RISE TO NEW HEIGHTS OF DIVINE GLORY! Instead of bailing out and saving himself (like so many captains and pilots in our secular realm) this Good Shepherd lays down his life for the needs of the sheep ... even going after the one lost out of 99.

And that obviously leads to the third and final quality in our Good Shepherd search: our Good Shepherd who became a lamb for us **expects his sheep to become less like sheep and more like shepherds the longer they are with Him.** It always amazes me that too often Christians say just the opposite of this expectation layed out by God. Time and time again when someone whose been around for a while is asked to offer a shepherding spirit, so often I'll hear: *"Oh, I've done that many times before - so get someone else to do it because I've already done all the shepherding I'm going to do!"* Just recently, Hope's President asked several members to become stewardship shepherds; and many of them bailed out with the response I have just shared. The facts are: Jesus never put a statute of limitations on good shepherding. As Pastor Julie so beautifully articulated in her May Commentary: there is certainly a time that each lead goose must fall back in the formation and let another take the lead. And as she said, when too much of the load is given or taken too long by the lead goose -- there is a serious risk that this goose will fall out and die. So whether we are sheep or geese - the pattern is the same: **we must each be ready at all times to assume a higher profile of leading the flock.**

That's a serious challenge for the church in today's secular culture. More and more, we who are church leaders see the opposite trend: **people are bailing out like the pilot rather than faithfully staying with the ship or the formation.** Recently a member and I were commiserating over the fact that too often in today's marketplace -- whether the church or rotary or many other arenas which put "serviced above self -- **the leaders find themselves often only preaching to the choir (to the most highly committed).** Then this member said to me: *"You better get used to preaching only to the choir, Peter -- because that's going to be more and more the formation of the future."*

Well, dear friends, if that's the formation of the future, then the church is in real deep trouble. Because the gospel is not given by God to only the choir; **quite to the contrary, it's been given for the benefit of the whole world (God so loved the world).** And God is totally unsatisfied and so am I when we begin to limit his offering to only the choir. Any true Good Shepherd will not desire to be a part of a flock in which "shepherding" is viewed as only the domain of the most highly committed. God expects quality shepherding from every sheep who has joined the fold. And that's why Jesus says in Matthew - if in your search you encounter sheep who will not hear my Good News, *"then shake off the dust and move on."* God's clear and concise Word is that he is in search of sheep who will become Good Shepherds. And he hopes and believes that he has found them. And each and every one of you ARE THEM!!

So, upward and onward with the task and the search of finding and becoming Good Shepherds like our Lord. AMEN.

*Easter IV (Good Shepherd Sunday)
Glenwood Lutheran / Sunset House
May 3, 1998
Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor & Chaplain*

“THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS!”

What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.” John 10:29

Almost a lifetime ago--I tried out for high school track. I didn't succeed. But my best high school friend ran the relay. Even though I didn't run -- it was a real thrill just to watch our coach with the relay team. The coach was a perfectionist -- but not with a stop watch or styles of running. Our coach focused all of his attention on what he called “the most critical aspect of the relay ... where races were won or lost -- the hand-off of the baton.” He would always say, *“It's in the hands that races are won -- good hands are more important than fast feet.”*

And how true that was! A bumbled exchange of the baton - particularly a drop -- meant a race had been run in vain, no matter how fast the runners. I'll never forget watching my friend & his teammates practice their exchanges: the strides had to be in perfect sync ... the legs had to be pumping with the same rhythm -- the hands had to be reaching with the same extension & grace. And in the moment of the exchange -- it was as if the two runners were indistinguishable -- they were running as one. My friend and his teammates came to realize that those were the hands that could be trusted.

Today's “good shepherd” emphasis talks about many things ... about the sheep; about the shepherd's voice; and earlier about the hireling. But the greatest image of this text is John's focus upon the security & the safety of Jesus' hands: *What my Father has given is greater than all else; and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. And the Father & I are one!* There is no more secure hand than the hand of God. When God holds his sheep--it is a sure thing. And Jesus runs in perfect rhythm with his Father--they are a perfect relay team. A more care-filled, expert handling could not be imagined by any coach. In Jesus Christ--the Good Shepherd, God keeps the **WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS!**

The question posed by some Jewish folks in Jesus' day --and still posed by other folks today is: Can this Jesus really be trusted?? In whose hands can I entrust my life or the life of my children?? Who is the anointed one -- which is the one that will hold us secure?? Who can we really follow??

Jay Rochelle, a commentator answers, *“One can be a Buddhist without having much to do with the Buddha, because He simply taught a way of life. But Jesus did more than teach a way -- he WAS and STILL IS that way -- he lived the life that he taught.”* To be the Good Shepherd is not to teach or talk about a way of living -- it is **TO LIVE THAT WAY!** That's why Jesus says in today's text,

"The WORKS that I do in the Father's name testify to me." It's not his teaching or his talking -- but his living out his teachings that made him the Good Shepherd. Unlike all other religions -- **Christianity does not merely give us a Good Teacher or a Good Coach! It gives us a Good Shepherd** -- the one who fully sacrificed his hands & whole body to show us the depth of his love! That's why some traditions talk about the blood of Jesus -- because it is in the "blood of his hands" that we see the one who can be trusted! He didn't merely give us a lesson or a talk on love ... he gave his life in love!!

The hands of the Good Shepherd reflect the life of a good relay runner -- **always extended outward ... always open to receive the burden of the next leg of the run-- always seeking to do the works of a loving Father.** On Good Shepherd Sundays ... **Christians are challenged to see if they are running in sync with their Lord.** Do we find our hands to be receptive or resistant to Jesus' handing off His baton. Regretably -- many Christians are **closed-fisted** to Jesus -- they don't even try to take the baton from Jesus. I'm reminded of the story of the **black man who was trying to join a fashionable congregation.** The pastor advised the black man to give his decision deep consideration. So the old man said he would go home and pray about it. When the pastor next saw the black man - he asked, **"What did the Lord tell you?"** The black man said: **"The Lord said it wasn't any use trying to join your church -- he said he'd been trying to get into your church for decades and still hadn't made it!"**

Many Christians continue to be "closed-fisted" to Jesus Christ -- **they are "takers" of God's blessings but not "givers" of God's goodness & grace.** Then there are those who use their hands to teach violence & perversion rather than supportive care. A few years ago--the papers detailed a Sarasota Florida couple who was schooling their boys in the family business: armed robbery. They taught their boys how to use the tools of the trade -- AK-47 assault rifles, surveillance methods, survival gear and disguises. After each robbery - the boys were totally debriefed and their mistakes were corrected.

It's amazing that any parent could be more serious about training children for crime than modeling Christ for service. And we wonder why we have shootings in our schools, violence on our streets and abuse in our homes. Too many people are teaching their children to use their hands to hurt and destroy. Is it any wonder that there is no trust and security in our daily living?!?

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gave us a new commandment -- **"that we lay down our lives for one another,"** not use our hands to destroy one another. That is quite a baton to handle!! Many today want to be a part of God's relay race -- but they start the race and then give up before it's over. Obviously -- it takes a lot of practice to get our lives into sync with Jesus' style. It's like the little boy who was in the doctor's waiting room with his mom asking her all the "why's"

and the "how's about God. Finally he asked, "Why doesn't God ever get tired and just quit?!?" And his mom answered, "Because God is the fullness of love - and true love never gets tired and quits." Unlike so many arms that have held us tight one moment ... and then pushed us away the next moment -- God's hands never push us away -- they are the only hands that can be trusted to keep us secure -- "God's hands never get tired of holding his beloved children!"

That's why throughout all the centuries of Christianity -- so many of us have admired the 23rd Psalm. Esp. the verse which says: *"Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies."* Only the hands of God would prepare a feast of forgiveness for not only his friends -- but even his enemies. And that's why only God HAS THE WHOLE WORLD IN HIS HANDS -- because only God's hands would prepare a table and invite those who have betrayed him ... and deserted him ... and denied him! He continues to sit at the head of the table with his hands wide open and says: *"Come unto me ... even if you haven't had a perfect run or relay ... come to me and I will forgive you and relieve you of the burdens of yesterday's run. And then leave my table without hostility ... without resentment ... and without any impure thoughts -- and go offer my hands of mercy to someone else who needs a helping hand in this troubled world."*

Is it any wonder that he keeps us preparing this table even when we have denied and betrayed Him. And with his hand - he offers each of us the "bread of life" and the "blood of his sacrifice" -- so that we might be willing to use our hands to share His bread and His blood with THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD. And as we do this - we sing: *"He's Got the Whole World In His Hands!"*

Amen.