Fourth Sunday of Easter (C) – May 11, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
John 10:22-30 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Alleluia, Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)
Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.
I'm noticing again this Easter season how well-crafted our lectionary is, those appointed readings that set the theme for each week's service. The seven weeks of Easter build upon each other and can be seen as an outline of the story of the church's development, or of each individual Christian's life of faith. The first two weeks of Easter have the disciples struggling to comprehend the startling reality of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the difficulty of communicating that reality to others. The Fundamental questions of faith and doubt they face are things that all believers must confront at some point in life. In the second and third week we also start coming to grips with the nature of our mission, first just to communicate in a coherent and convincing way the central affirmation of God's involvement in our world and in each of our lives in Jesus, but then to come to grips with our complicity in the ways of this world that made that involvement necessary, and at the same time to grasp God's reconciling grace and forgiveness, which we are called not only to receive ourselves with deep humility, but also to pass on to others. Today we confront another reality of the church that has been with us from the very beginning, namely the fact that the message and mission we bear face significant opposition and resistance. They are not received uniformly as good news. In fact, they are seen as existential threats to the powers that be and the ways they have ordered the world. Jesus never promised the church smooth sailing. Quite the contrary, in fact. Just as he was opposed in his earthly ministry, so may we expect to be opposed in our continuation of that ministry as his risen body.

All four of the Gospels, together with the rest of the New Testament, reflect the opposition faced by Jesus, his disciples, and the early church. But among these perhaps none reflects the contentious nature of the early Christian movement more so than John. John was the last of the Gospels to be written, and comes from a time of increasing polarization between the new messianic Jesus movement and those who did not accept Jesus' claims. The Christians, as the former group came to be called already in the New Testament, were being forced out of the synagogues in this period and into their own separated communities. We think that we are polarized in our own day, and we are. But the polarization reflected in John is at least as extreme, and probably more so.

Today's Gospel reading reflects this conflict. You have to choose sides. You're either in or out. There are no bystanders, and no middle ground, no room for compromise. And that makes us uncomfortable, doesn't it? I know it makes *me* uncomfortable. And I think it's meant to. But let me talk us through what is going on here and how we might apply this to our own lives and situations in ways that are helpful and not destructive.

First, there is no getting around the fact that Jesus is being provocative here. Today's Gospel reading is part of a longer section in John in which Jesus speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd. You've already noticed that this is Good Shepherd Sunday. You've seen the cover the bulletin and the images inside. You heard me talk to the children about Jesus as our shepherd. But you may not have noticed that the words "Good Shepherd" don't appear in our Gospel text. They do appear earlier in this chapter of John, though, and you need to know that it is exactly Jesus' claim to be the "Good Shepherd" that is the reason for the crowd's challenge to him here. You also need to know that the kings of Israel were often referred to as shepherds in the Hebrew scriptures. So there is a direct connection between the shepherds and the Messiah, the hoped-for king that God would send to restore God's people. Jesus' earlier calling himself the "Good

Shepherd" implies that there are bad shepherds, or even that *most* shepherds, most *kings*, most leaders of God's people, are bad for those they lead. And there is good biblical precedent for this—famous passages in Jeremiah 23 and Ezekiel 34 that take Israel's kings to task for their bad shepherding, for feeding themselves at the sheep's expense, for scattering their flock instead of gathering and protecting it. All of this we can easily miss when we read just one short piece of the text, as we have to do in our worship services. But it would have been front and center in the minds of the crowds that challenge Jesus. In fact, there's a translation issue here that reinforces this. The initial question, "how long will you keep us in suspense?" is probably better translated, "how long will you keep provoking us?" Jesus knows what he is doing, and the crowds know it too. They want him to come out and say he's claiming to be king so the Romans will know it too. Because if the Romans knew what he was getting at, they wouldn't like it, and they'd do something about it.

Two more quick things about this text. First, those who listen to Jesus' voice do so because they are his sheep. They are not his sheep because they listen to his voice. They listen to his voice because they are his sheep. This may seem like a picky distinction, but it makes all the difference in the world. If we became Jesus' sheep by choosing to listen to his voice, then our fate is in our own hands, and our task ask the church would be to exhort people to listen to Jesus and follow his teachings and commandments so they could reap the rewards of being his sheep. But that's not what Jesus is saying here. We hear his voice and follow him because we *are* his sheep, not in order to *become* his sheep. So how then do we become his sheep? Don't you have to be born a sheep to be a sheep? How about reborn, another of the themes of John's gospel? No one enters the kingdom of God, says Jesus back in chapter three, unless they are born again, from above, by water and the Spirit. Lutheran theology reflects this. It claims that when the gospel of Jesus' love and forgiveness are communicated, then the Holy Spirit gets to work to create faith in us. It is faith and trust in Jesus' promises that make us into Jesus' sheep. And faith and trust are entirely gifts of God, the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

If we miss this crucial distinction, then we can easily be lured into an us/them mentality that pulls us out of the world, and makes us smug and self-satisfied about our good choices. "We followers of Jesus are the good guys. Everyone else are the bad guys. They can either start listening to Jesus like us or they can go to Hell. Literally." But if we remember that there but for the grace of God go we, if we remember, as Jesus says earlier in this chapter, that he has other sheep besides us, if we remember back to chapter three where Jesus said that it is because God *loves* the world that Jesus was sent, and that he came to be a light to people walking in darkness, then maybe, by God's grace, our hearts will be opened to see the world as God sees it, and to love the world as God does in Jesus. Then, maybe, we will see our task as communicating with both humility and conviction God's saving love in Jesus' death and resurrection, even and especially for those who "love the darkness rather than the light," to quote my favorite verse from John three, so that God the Holy Spirit might be about the business of lambing, as farmers call it, bringing new sheep into existence.

A final thing to take away from this text for our lives is Jesus' promise that he is both willing and able to give us, his sheep, the gift of eternal life – not just life after death in the sweet by and by, but real, genuine, abundant life that begins now, on this side of the grave. Whatever is yet to come, we are in the strong yet gentle hands of the Good Shepherd, who will never let go of us, and because of that we are free to live right now without fear as agents of God's love in the world. May we take that promise to heart, so that our lives might show forth the great good news that Christ is risen, Alleluia! (Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia!)