

John 10:1-10; Easter 4A; 5/7/17

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Many years ago, my dear friend gave me a copy of a sermon by Paul Tillich. It was called *You Are Accepted* and, when I read that sermon, it changed my life. Brielle, Anja, Lauren, Dane, Clayton, and Drew, on this day when you make public affirmation of your baptism, there is one thing above all else I really hope you have learned over the last two years, one thing I pray you understand in the depth of your heart. **YOU ARE ACCEPTED!** Confirmands, if there is one thing I hope you grasped, it is that you will always remember and trust that God accepts and loves you as you are. Today's readings make this message very clear – you are accepted, you belong and you are deeply loved, a message that is really very simple.

On this Good Shepherd Sunday, we heard the words of Psalm 23. This is probably one of the best known, best loved poems in the Bible. It is known by people around the world. In fact, I am sure many gathered here today know Psalm 23 by heart. Confirmands, you may not have the poem memorized, but you can always remember the beginning words of this Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." On this day as you make profession of your faith, I ask you to think about these words because they **give** you a profession of faith that will speak to you in

remarkable ways at many points of time throughout your life. As you go through life, during times of joy and times of sorrow – something which all of you will face – these words tell us of a God who is like a Good Shepherd, caring for you, protecting you and guiding you. God is the Good Shepherd who walks with you through all of life and provides you with abundant, eternal life, life that truly matters.

You are **accepted**, you **belong** and you are **loved**.

In today's gospel reading from John we hear more about the one we call the Good Shepherd. Jesus differentiates himself from the wannabe or imitation shepherds – the bad shepherds. He warns us that there are others who exploit and emphasize division instead of expressing love and bringing healing, unity and peace. But, Jesus says **he** is the one who is the gateway to true life, life that really matters, life that is abundant and life that makes a difference.

Jesus also says the sheep follow their shepherd, the Good Shepherd, because they know his voice. As we go through life we find there are all kinds of voices that compete for our attention, voices that are familiar and unfamiliar. There are voices of deception and trickery. But, these voices will take us to damaging, even destructive places. There are also voices of truth and these voices will take us to meaningful life that truly matters. The

voice of the Good Shepherd is **the** voice of truth and this voice will always tell us of a God who loves us so much that this God is continually seeking us out, even when we feel lost. This is a voice that is always at work bringing us back home to the sheepfold where we belong, comforting us when we need comfort, protecting us from danger, and telling us we are loved.

Yes, you are **accepted**, you **belong** and you are **loved**.

Now, like most sheep, there will probably come a time when you will think the grass is greener on the other side of the fence, in a place where other sheep and goats are grazing. There will probably come a time when being one of Jesus' sheep doesn't sound like such a cool thing and all this talk of green pastures and still waters sounds more like advertisements for cemeteries or golf courses than for an exciting, fulfilling, abundant life of meaning. Perhaps that has already been part of your journey. I am sure that during such times, your family members have been and will be praying that the Good Shepherd keeps his eyes on you as you struggle to be free and go whenever, wherever and do who knows what. However, the good news is that this Good Shepherd loves you so much he will **never ever** let you go. And what is most amazing is that to be connected to and cared for by the Good Shepherd is not only comforting, this connection gives you a

life that is **truly** liberating and freeing. As you follow the voice of the Good Shepherd, you will live into a life of freedom because the Good Shepherd frees us from all the stuff of life that would hold us captive. While any one of us may stray, the reality is that in following the voice of the Good Shepherd, the **love** we are given is what **truly** sets us free to live.

Yes, always remember you are **accepted**, you **belong** and you are **loved**.

Today's gospel reading also tells us the shepherd of the sheep "calls his own sheep by name" as he leads them out. He calls them "**by name.**" Did you get that? This shepherd has such a close relationship with you that he knows your name and calls you by name! This Good Shepherd intimately knows us, understands us and knows each of our names. Now, for someone to care about us in this way means that this shepherd, our loving God, knows what we are experiencing. This shepherd is walking with us through all our experiences, good, bad and everything in between. This kind of relationship means we are never alone. And, we don't have to pretend or try to be different or behave like someone else because this shepherd knows us inside and out. This shepherd knows the good, the bad and the ugly about us and loves us anyway. Confirmands, I know there are times when you will probably do your best to try to avoid being

known. But, you see, in Jesus, we discover a Good Shepherd who stays where we stay, who experiences what we experience, who knows what we know. Yes, our Good Shepherd knows us inside and out and calls us by name. And, as we listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd call us by name, that voice of is **always** the voice of love.

Confirmands, yes, you are **accepted**, you **belong** and you are **loved**.

Finally, today, as we look at the words given to us in these readings, the gospel message is not so much about how **we** see or define this Good Shepherd. What is ultimately important, is how the Good Shepherd sees and defines us. Namely, as sheep who **belong** and are **loved** so much that he would lay down his life for us, for the entire world. And, knowing who we are and **whose** we are gives us the freedom and energy to truly live. So, Brielle, Anja, Lauren, Dane, Clayton, and Drew, as you make profession of your faith, God is showering you with the abundant, eternal life only the Good Shepherd can give, life that truly matters. Listen to his voice telling you that you are **accepted**, you **belong** to God and you are deeply **loved** by a God who will always hold you in that love and **never** let you go.