



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
235 South Kenilworth Avenue, Elmhurst, IL
*Partners in Christ's Service since 1890***

NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

At Home or Small Group Worship for October 11th

OPENING SONG – *audio available on the church website*

Assurance

Beck

Michelle Maiers, Meg McGarry, Kevin Loeper, Al Thurkow

CALL TO WORSHIP

From the hymn, There's a Wideness in God's Mercy

There's a wideness in God's mercy.

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea.

There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.

There is no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven.

There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.

OPENING PRAYER

We give thanks to God, who spread a cloud for a covering and gave fire to light the night! God opened the rock, and water gushed forth and flowed through the desert sands. It is good to seek the Lord and the strength only the Lord can give, a Presence that continually abides. We will remember the wonderful works and miracles from God. Let us worship God with heart, soul, and mind! Amen.

GLORIA PATRI

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son

And to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning

Is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

Prayer Hymn #263

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place,

I can feel his mighty power and his grace;

I can hear the brush of angels' wings,
I see glory on each face;
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Silent Prayer

PASTORAL PRAYER – *audio available on the church website*

Rev. Mike Daly

Almighty and Gracious God, in the name of Jesus, we come to worship you in the sanctuary of this church and in the beauty of your creation. Before you, O God, we bow our heads to give you honor. Because of Jesus, we seek to know your ways so that we may unite more closely with those who comprise your body.

Holy One, it is hard to live amid uncertainty. We don't fear not knowing what will happen next. But instead, we worry about what would be a faithful response. We don't want to let you down, Lord. Help us to avoid believing that *my way is your way*. Please help us be humble in the way you humbled yourself through Jesus. Too much conflict, confusion, and division reign in the world— so help us sow more seeds of love and forgiveness.

We come to you seeking answers—and in the silence of holiness, we listen intently while your love hovers over us. You answer not with words so much as with acts of loving-kindness, not with judgment but with compassion, not with political pronouncements or demands of purity of belief but with mercy that seeks reconciliation and fullness of life.

When we seek absolute answers, you say, "Love me; Love your neighbor as yourself; Love your enemy. Be of one mind with Christ." Our prayer to be open to your call - to love you first – to love what you love and who you love - to love our neighbor and ourselves - and even love our enemies.

You hear all our prayers, Compassionate Shepherd. We pray for those who are ill and those who grieve. We pray for those who suffer the ravages of racism, and those who cannot or will not see what racism does. We pray for those who suffer the anxieties of uncertainty and those struggling with isolation and restriction. We pray for those who fear for their lives. We pray for those who face poverty and hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Open your heart and mind to us, O God of love, as we find our way into your embrace. Through Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

OUR LORD'S PRAYER – *audio available on the website* Michelle Maiers, vocals

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE – *audio available on the church website* Martha Mendoza

SCRIPTURE – *audio available on the church website*

Psalm 23 RSV

The Divine Shepherd - A Psalm of David

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;
 he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
 he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
 for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
 I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
 thy rod and thy staff,
 they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil,
 my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
 all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
 forever.

The Lord is My Shepherd, Not a Lion Tamer

Like many of you, I became familiar with Psalm 23 at an early age. I love it as much as you do, I'm sure. Now, I have to admit, I never once thought of myself as a "sheep." I hope you don't either. It does say the words, "The Lord is my shepherd." But it doesn't say, "And I am but a wandering sheep without a clue."

There is a faith model in this scripture we use that makes a congregation like ours so special. We are all called to serve as laity, lay *leaders*. There are countless ways God calls on us to be caring leaders working for peace just like a shepherd. And, this is a model of shared leadership, so that means lay leadership can involve everyone and has a lot of different looks. Sheep is not one of them.

The author's intent here (and we think the author is King David) is to describe our true leader, our true guide, our true teacher. So, we focus on the metaphor of shepherd as *one way* to conceptualize our relationship with God. Many scholars argue that there are multiple images for God when we use "shepherd" – gentle, attentive, rugged. Shepherd can convey the idea that God has humbled himself to be closer to us.

Knowing what we know, we might assume that shepherds were only considered a lowly class in the ancient world. The image works well in the 21st century, to contrast the hustling world of work and technologies with the simple life of a shepherd. And, it is not an image of God to dismiss. We know that shepherds are good, kind, and attentive. An image of Jesus as the good shepherd has a universal appeal. A picture of Jesus holding a lamb lets every child know that Jesus loves children.

However, Hebrew scholars suggest that the writer, King David, took this image from ancient political courts because kings, who had a reputation for being noble, were often spoken of as shepherds. Kings were seen as those who guided and protected their people. David was himself a shepherd of the field, and now he was the king of a great nation. In this psalm, he confesses with deep humility and trust that Yahweh was his shepherd – his king. Like the noble kings of old, Yahweh, the shepherd, offers peace for his people.

Please note how the metaphor for a caring leader is the *shepherd* and not (say) a ringleader or a lion tamer, where God makes demands or whips up obedience. As a boy, I remember going to the circus to see the lion's parade around and do tricks.

The crowd watched the lion trainer work a chair and crack a whip to make those lions obey his every command.

That is not our God. God does not whip up fear within us to "make us do what God wants." That is not the way our relationship with God works. To the contrary, the Bible, especially Jesus, says over and over again, do NOT be afraid. 'I, the Lord your God, am with you, and we will work things out together.'

God is watchful, attentive, and devoted, according to Psalm 23. And, our beloved shepherd is equipped with two important tools. The first tool is the shepherd's staff. Sometimes sheep get stuck. A shepherd reaches with a staff and, with the gentlest of touches, slips it under the leg to gently pull it back to safety.

We all fall into traps, fall into despair, fall into the wrong crowd. We get into holes during our lifetime, and God is forever seeking to pull us out. God extends love with a long reach - usually, in the form of a trusted friend or a wise family member.

Remember, the other end of a staff is pointed. It is for fending off enemies of the sheep, such as lions. The staff is *never* used against the sheep. It is not a tool to enforce conformity or obedience; the shepherd is the *good* shepherd.

The second valuable tool of the shepherd is the shepherd's voice. Sheep get to know the shepherd's voice. In other words, sheep know the shepherd, and the shepherd knows each of the sheep. The Bible says God knows your name. We all appreciate voice recognition because of the deep comfort it provides when we need it most. Think of a child who is in distress and hears the loving voice of mom or dad.

Psalm 23 proclaims the overflowing sense of God's blessings on our lives. This cup overflows with the abundance of God's people in the world. People called as a noble people, equipped for the work of peace and love. King David believed in his people, so he set out to lead in the same empowering way.

There is a story about how to say this psalm from the mid-1800s that demonstrates such powerful love. It was March, but there were snow flurries and frozen ground. In a log cabin on the prairie was a boy named Tommy, who was dying of diphtheria. The minister who came that day was known as a circuit-rider. Someone who rode his horse hundreds of miles to cabins and churches across the land to minister in places no other clergy served. This pastor came to the cabin and asked about Tommy, whom he had heard was sick.

The boy's father ushered the pastor through an opening in the curtain to a back room where Tommy was in bed. The dad left so the two could have some privacy. He greeted the boy, and they talked for a while. Then the minister asked Tommy, "Do you know how to say the 23rd Psalm?"

"Yes, sir. I learned it in Sunday School." Tommy recited it with ease.

"That's excellent, Tommy, well done." And then, the pastor asked, "May I teach you another way to say the 23rd Psalm?"

He explained, when you begin, count your on fingers, starting with your thumb. When you get to the fourth word, the word "my," you grab that finger and finish saying the rest of the psalm holding on. The minister explained that it can remind you that you are God's, and God is yours. That finger is for the wedding ring of your mother's and father's hand. It is the finger that will always remind you of their love for you, especially if you ever get scared.

Tommy liked this new way to pray, and they even practiced it together. After a nice long visit, the two said goodbye with a hug, and the pastor departed.

About two months later, the minister returned to the cabin. It was now well into spring. The snow was gone. As he got closer, he saw a mound of dirt near the cabin with a cross on it. He knew then that Tommy was gone.

The minister talked for a while with Tommy's parents. They talked about how brave Tommy was; they talked about his death; and finally, the mother asked. "You know pastor, something strange happened when Tommy died. We kissed him goodnight. In the morning, he was gone; he had died. But it was so strange. His right hand was wrapped around the fourth finger of his left hand. Do you know what that means, pastor?"

"Yes," the pastor said, "It means he loved you both very much - and he knew you loved him." Amen.

OFFERTORY – *audio available on the church website*

*Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart! With voice as full and strong as ocean's surging praise.
Send forth the sturdy hymns of old, the psalms of ancient days.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice, give thanks, and sing!*

Amazing Grace, My Chains Are Gone
Kevin Loeper, Michelle Maiers, Meg McGarry

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Gracious God, accept our gifts – of time, talent, and treasure - as evidence of our desire to participate with you in the care of your beloved creation. These gifts symbolize our thanksgiving for all that you provide. Through these gifts, we praise you. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

DOXOLOGY

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise him, all creatures here below;
Praise him above, ye heavenly host:
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN – *audio available on the church website*

Meg McGarry, vocals
Dave Benziger, guitar

#614 I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me

I'm gonna live so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna live so God can use me any time and anywhere.

I'm gonna work so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna work so God can use me any time and anywhere.

I'm gonna pray so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna pray so God can use me any time and anywhere.

I'm gonna sing so God can use me any time and anywhere.
I'm gonna sing so God can use me any time and anywhere.

BENEDICTION

Go forth and be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the afflicted. Honor all people. Love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you, amen.