

The Church is One Flock

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[0 : 0 0] well if you would like to take your Bible out to Acts chapter 20 on page 930 Susan read for us earlier it's a wonderful it's a wonderful day for us here at St. John's the last Sunday I was preaching in a couple of churches an arch churches in Montreal one meets in a Baptist church and one meets in the lounge of a house which was great fun so that's why I've got this platform I figure I needed something extra this morning with which to speak with you from and now I feel four inches higher than contradiction so it's also a great Sunday because I hope you've been following Dan Gifford's blog Dan has been at GAFCON with 1300 and something or other other Anglican leaders from across the globe from 38 countries representing tens of millions of Anglicans and Dan has been deeply infected by the

African dancing and singing and we look forward to seeing an all new Dan when he comes back next week and I just I warn you in advance if if you have been reading his blog it's called GAFCON Dan and I think he's flying out last night you get a sense of a global Christian movement that's full of life and joy in the midst of difficult circumstances so it's a great day for us to meet at the end of this GAFCON conference and I might read to you a few words from the statement nearer the end of the service thirdly it's a great Sunday for us because today we commission St. Peter's Fireside and next Sunday St. Peter's Fireside begins meeting on a weekly basis downtown Vancouver some of the members here in this service and the next service and in the evening service will not be with us next week as they will transition and become members of St. Peter's Fireside and the commissioning the full commissionings tonight but I thought at each service in the morning here we should just pray for the leaders and on your hymn sheet you can see underneath the sermon I know some of you read ahead and some of you don't there's a commissioning prayer which we will say together when we when I finish the sermon and the last reason why this is a terrific Sunday for us at St. John's is because we're going to look at this is an absolutely wonderful passage for us today and it shows us what I think is the most central the most significant and perhaps the most comprehensive picture of the church in all the Bible

God is the shepherd we are the sheep and this goes right deep into the bedrock of Bible revelation if you're new with us since the beginning of September we've been looking at how important the church is to Jesus Christ and we've seen the church isn't a temporary institution you know something made up by clever Christians it's the reason why God created the world it's not a spiritual resource for us as individual consumers to come to and use to sort of make withdrawals when we get a bit spiritually dry no it's the central instrument of God for his purposes in the world we saw didn't we that we're not even really a voluntary society but we've been called by God and it's Jesus by his spirit who gathers us together and builds us he says I'll build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it prevail against it and he gives us the keys of the kingdom so that our fundamental identity as sheep and as believers is as an assembly gathered by Jesus

Christ built into a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit and we started to look at some of the very rich metaphors for the church a holy temple a vine a building a people a kingdom a body well we haven't got to that one yet but today is the most all-inclusive image I think and that is of the sheep shepherd and it comes to us from a deeply moving and deeply personal passage and if you look back over the page in Acts 20 it begins in verse 17 the apostle Paul has gathered the leaders of the congregation in Ephesus which is the church he'd spent more time than any other and he gathers them together and he says to them in verse 25 he says none of you among whom I went about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again and then when we got to the end verse 37 there was much weeping on the part of all as they embraced Paul and kissed him being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken that they would not see his face again Paul knows he's facing likely death and these are his last words to this church which is very precious and dear to him and he lays bare the bones of his own life and the motivation for his ministry and at the heart of it are the words that Susan read to us in verses 28 to 32 which is where we're going to spend our time today which is kind of a charge it's Paul's commission to the local church leaders where he hands over the responsibility for the church for them and the core issue is that the congregation is a flock is the flock of God if you will and God is the shepherd just look at verse 28 to see the shepherding words he says pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit made you overseers the little phrase to care for is the word to shepherd the church of God which he obtained with his own blood then 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in you come in not sparing the flock so I want to say three things about this image from from this passage this morning

I want to talk about the fact that God is a shepherd I want to talk about how he cares for his flock and I want to talk thirdly about how he keeps and guards his flock so firstly God is a shepherd God now some of you have been Christians for a long time and some of us are new to this but the problem with the sheep shepherd picture is that there are two very different sides to it on the one side is the picture of God as the shepherd we love this you know this is the picture of the God who comforts who picks up the lambs and bears them on his shoulder it's the picture of provision and security and rescue the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want very important and precious to us but there is another side and we have to hold both sides together and the other side is that you and I are sheep and the problem is that's very confronting and very insulting and stark and those of us who have been Christians a long time have a niggling understanding of this and some of us who are new to it I think have a fresh understanding of it because the only time we see sheep are on nature programs are on menus or you know children's toys you know the fluffy lamby lamby soft stuff toys are there any people here who are sheep farmers well they will tell you that sheep are absolutely defenseless they're absolutely directionless and they have no clue what is best for them take any other domestic animal if you take the animal away from where it lives it will either find its way home or it'll survive in the wild but not sheep they wander around they wander off cliffs they fall down holes and without a shepherd to look after themselves they will actually put themselves in the way of wolves and only realize the wolf is there when it's too late and I've got no idea whether sheep like to think of themselves in these terms or not or whether they're insulted by what I'm saying but I know all of us are far too clever and sophisticated to imagine ourselves as sheep which I'm which I think is probably a sheep-like thing to do

[8 : 57] John Stott is a very polite Bible commentator he was a Brit says this sheep are not at all the clean cuddly creatures they may appear in fact they are dirty subject to unpleasant pests and regularly need to be dipped in strong chemicals to rid them of lice ticks and worms they are also unintelligent wayward and obstinate and then he hesitates but he applies this metaphor to characterize the people of God as dirty lousy and stupid well if you've never been offended by this it means you don't really understand that you're a sheep or you've never really known yourself to be a sheep and you can't receive God to be your shepherd unless you've embraced your identity as a sheep you have we we just have to get to this place to accept the fact that I don't know what's best for me and you don't know what's we really don't know where we're going we really we constantly put ourselves in spiritual danger we've got no idea really how to protect ourselves from spiritual wolves and God cannot be our shepherd until we confess ourselves as defenseless and dependent sheep and I don't think we can begin to appreciate the whole storyline of the Bible until we come to this point because from the first book of the Bible to the last book of the Bible

God reveals himself as a shepherd I don't know if you've ever noticed that so in the Exodus God presents himself as a shepherd rescuing his flock leading them and guiding them to safety doing for them what they couldn't do for themselves throughout the Psalms and the prophets one verse of which James read at the beginning of our service God reveals himself in this way the Lord God will tend his flock like a shepherd he will gather the lambs in his arms he will carry them in his bosom and for those of you young parents who've got young children he will gently lead those who are young it's a special promise for you and this is who God is he loves to be a shepherd and he loves to care for his flock and to lead them into green pastures so much does he love it and enjoy it that he shares his shepherding with human leaders so Moses is called a shepherd

Joshua is called a shepherd King David was really a shepherd but God called him from the flock and he said you shall be a shepherd of my people Israel and as you come to the end of the Old Testament we find that the shepherds of God's people are bad shepherds bad shepherds and God's people are scattered the reading from Ezekiel 34 when they were basically fleecing the sheep they were not teaching the word of God and a few verses on in that very chapter God makes this promise of one true shepherd he says I will rescue my flock they will no longer be a prey I will judge between sheep and sheep and I will set over them one shepherd my servant David and he shall feed them he'll feed them and be their shepherd and I the Lord will be their God he's speaking about Jesus and that's why of course

Jesus deliberately calls himself the good shepherd in the New Testament and here's the twist he's the good shepherd who lays his life down for the sheep the way in which Jesus pastors his people and rescues his people is through his death by laying down his life through sacrifice it's in his death he beats off the wolves and when he rose from the dead he God appointed him to be the great shepherd of the sheep and he will continue to be the great shepherd of the sheep forever and when he comes on the day of judgment he will judge as a shepherd judges he separates the sheep from the goats because the sheep know his voice and follow him and this is my first point God is a shepherd God and God has a flock it's the story of the Bible it's the story of the world and we have to hold both of the sides of this picture together that we are sheep and he is the shepherd because becoming a Christian is realizing that we have wandered astray we are like sheep who've gone astray which I noticed we said in the confession this morning have you noticed that?

we have heard and strayed from your ways like lost sheep did you mean that? if you did I'm very glad because then we return to the true shepherd of our souls so I want to move to the second point then how does God care and how does God love his sheep but before I do for those of you who are in the Bible study groups and following closely I just want to point out in verse 28 Paul says pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock he's speaking about one congregation in Ephesus and he calls the one congregation the whole flock because in the New Testament what can be said about the local church can also be said about the universal church throughout history and throughout the world it's very just and what can be said about the universal church can also be said about the local church however back to the topic we are the sheep of his pasture and the people of his hand so secondly then how does God love his flock?

[14 : 51] how does he do it? if God is the shepherd and if we are sheep how does God exercise his pastoral care today? how do we and if we depend upon him for our protection and spiritual life and care how is he involved day to day?

how does he love his flock? and part of the answer of course is who Paul is speaking to so in verse 17 you can see he calls for the elders of the church now elders are not the grey hairs elders are those with some responsibility in the church in verse 28 they are called overseers which is the word bishops and then again in verse 28 they are called pastors that's the word care for there is so much confusion today about leadership in the church some of us want to be institutional historical and legitimate others want to be fluid innovative and authentic here is what we can say since Jesus began gathering his flock and building his church one of the ways that he directly cares for his church is that he shares his shepherding with under shepherds so that every congregation have men and women who have some form of spiritual oversight and pastoral care and it's interesting every church in the New Testament has a group a plurality of leaders some who are full-time some who are part-time some who are paid some who are volunteer some who've had hands laid on in some sort of official recognition and some who haven't all sharing pastoral care and there's an amazing flexibility in the names and titles in spiritual oversight in the New Testament in fact I don't know if you remember it was three weeks ago and how can I possibly expect us to remember this but three weeks ago we looked at the verse that said we are meant to be bishops to each other we're meant to take oversight over each other's souls we're meant to care about the spiritual welfare and nurture of one another in the congregation because as sheep we can't take care of our own spiritual oversight and while Jesus remains the chief shepherd he appoints a group of the sheep from every flock to be responsible for the spiritual nurture and care of the rest of the flock you'll notice right at the beginning of verse 28 he reminds these leaders they're still sheep do you notice that?

pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock first he says you've got to pay careful attention to yourself because you're not going to you're not going to be able to care about the salvation of others if you're not caring about your own salvation you're not going to be able to lead and inspire other people into godliness if you're not leading a godly life it's very important for the congregation to remember that every leader is still a sheep just as much in need of rescuing and dipping and just as wayward and stubborn however I digress here's the point for us God does not resign and abdicate his role as shepherd look at the rest of verse 28 he says to the leaders pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood that's amazing stuff a father son and Holy Spirit don't step back and abandon the church all of God if you wish all of the Trinity are actively and personally engaged with what's happening in the flock the Holy Spirit makes pastors in his churches of course the Holy Spirit does it's the Holy Spirit who distributes gifts amongst us it's the Holy Spirit who humbles himself to work through processes and rosters and groups and individuals and even elections

I mean we don't know how these leaders were appointed do we we don't know whether they were elected by a 60% minimum majority or whatever doesn't really matter because all of those who are in pastoral care in a congregation are made by the Holy Spirit it's not that the Holy Spirit was very active in those early days and now he's sort of taken a back seat the Holy Spirit continues in this way it's not that he's a you know a manipulator pulling the master puppet pulling the puppet strings because we are the sheep of his pasture because of the spiritual nature of the church because it is his church the Holy Spirit directs us and guides us actively now and it doesn't really matter what denomination or what structure or polity of governance if the church is gathered around the grace the gospel of the grace of God the spirit of God is active and the reason this can be true is what Paul says in 28 this is the church of God church is not ours

St. John's doesn't belong to us we have no rights over it we didn't create it we don't sustain it it belongs to him the same is true for St. Peter's fireside if it's God's it's God's and then he says that God poured out an extraordinary phrase at the end of verse 28 the church he obtained with his own blood you ever thought about what an outrageous phrase that is God has blood and you can see at the bottom of the page the commentators are so nervous about this translators I'm sorry that say perhaps we should translate it as the blood of his own like Jesus his own son on the cross and that is a possible translation but either way it was the blood of God poured out to death to purchase us to save us to rescue us from being wandering sheep it's wonderful isn't it right here he takes them back to the cross why did Jesus die it's to bring us back from being lost to bring back people who weren't even aware of their own danger to purchase us for himself to be our shepherd and how do you know what something is worth well the answer really is what you're willing to pay for it

[21 : 42] I don't know if any of you've ever seen the antique road show I love that show I used to watch that show with my wife because we've got lots of junk that we're willing to part with as well the way the show runs is this we have these experts on valuation it started in England you've got to see the English version and people find all this junk in their attic and they bring it to the experts and the expert looks at this old chair or plate or trinket and says do you know what it's worth and then they tell this long story and you just want to know you want to know how much it's worth how much it's worth and then at the end they say it's worth nothing or they say it's worth 15,000 pounds they say people will pay 15,000 pounds for this today well how much how much are you worth to God well he's willing to pay the blood of his own price he's sorry the price of his own blood how precious are we to him he's willing to pour out his own blood and that means the person sitting next to you and the person sitting in front of you

God regards with almost infinite value and we dare not do less he is a shepherd and though he shares his pastoral caring with under shepherds he remains the true and ultimate pastor father son and holy spirit working for our well-being and I need to move quickly to the third point how does God guard us how does God keep his flock one of the reasons under shepherds are necessary is because of the danger of wolves so look down there please at verse 29 Paul says after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away disciples after them very interesting isn't it every single picture of the church that we've come across so far has an opposition to it

Jesus says I'll build my church what are the next words he says the gates of hell won't prevail against it and these wolves are false teachers pretending to be Christians pretending to be Christian teachers wolves in sheep's clothing Jesus calls them or as we call them today wolves often in shepherds clothing and verse 30 they twist the truth of the Bible to draw away followers after them and the reason this is so dangerous is because the primary way in which Jesus shepherds us is by his voice pastoral care at its heart is leading sheep into the pasture to feed on the word of God remember the psalm that we often sing here oh come let us worship and bow down let us kneel before the Lord our maker for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand next words today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts the very bond that the shepherd has with the sheep is their voice and we hear the voice of

Jesus Christ through the reading and teaching of scripture and through the hymns with each other that's why if a wolf can gain access to a pulpit or to a small group or on a board they will twist the word of God with their own ideas and sheep will be savaged that's why everyone with pastoral leadership has a double duty on the one side to teach the pure word of God undiluted but also to drive away wolves when they try and sneak in and this means affirming what is true as well as denying what is false and I want to say to us right now this is a very difficult thing to do in our current context people are happy for us as Christians and Christian leaders to say the positive things but don't say the negative things people are happy for us to say that Jesus I follow a Jesus who says I am the way the truth and the life but just don't add the next bit that

Jesus says no one comes to the father except through me and there's huge pressure to be positive and just say the positive stuff to affirm what is true but never to deny what is false it's one of the reasons the Gathcon was created and was so needed I think this is at the root frankly of so many of our current unhappy divisions it's because so many pastors neglected their duty to teach and to warn to guide and to guard to build and to battle and you've got an example right here in this sermon of where the apostle does both just look back at verse 26 he says I testify to you this day I'm innocent of the blood of all of you for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God that is very sobering he's saying that because he taught the whole gospel not just the nice bits not just the parts he thought was relevant he is innocent of the blood of his hearers and that means it is possible as a

[27 : 35] Christian pastor to be guilty of the blood of one's hearers and he's referring to a text back in Ezekiel where God says to the shepherds and the teachers this is what God says if I say to the wicked you shall surely die and you give him no warning nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way in order to save his life that wicked person shall die for his iniquity but his blood I will require at your hand very sobering so brother I say to you Alistair and to Mike and to the other leaders at St.

Peter's fireside as I say to myself and to all of us here at St. John's if a false teacher arises and we do nothing and say nothing we can be guilty of the blood of those sheep that are led astray and the reason it's so sober and somber is because of how precious every single sheep is to God himself this is the Gafcon statement that was released last night and it is very positive it's just a magnificent statement of the central Christian doctrine when they get to some of the issues that created Gafcon let me just read to you this this is the character and this is a global movement the character and boundaries of our fellowship are not determined by institutions but by the word of God the church is a place where the truth matters where it's guarded and promoted where alternatives are exposed for what they are an exchange of the truth of God for a lie the divisions in the Anglican communion will not be healed without a change of heart from those promoting the false gospel and to that end we pray and then they repent how glad I am for the truth speaking in that document and how grateful I am that the

Lord raised up Gafcon in our time of need and we ought to give thanks and continue to pray for the Artizo Institute that God would raise up pastors and shepherds who know him and who will preach the gospel so where do we turn to how does God guard us well look at verse 32 I'll finish with this verse 32 Paul says this to the leaders and now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance amongst those who are sanctified fabulous I can't tell you how wonderful it is to have something outside ourselves someone outside ourselves to look to because frankly we cannot rely on ourselves so we turn to God and the word of his grace not God separated from the word of his grace not the word of his grace separated from God because the way in which

God is active is as the word of his grace is preached and believed and as the word is taught he brings repentance and faith and as the word is taught he leads us into the pasture he makes us lie by still waters he restores our soul it's his voice that can do that the way we enter the flock is by hearing his voice calling us to follow him the word of God is able to build us up to strengthen us and sustain us and it's able to keep us for the long haul until we receive the inheritance in his presence so I don't know where you're at in your Christian life are you are you early on and you feel you need a lot of building up go to the word of God are you an older Christian and sense you need the long haul and you struggle struggle with the fact that the inheritance seems so far away well we need to go to the word of God that's how we're shepherded so it's a great passage for us today and now I want to

I want to commission the St. Peter's fireside folk but before I do I just say this do you remember in the Gospels when Jesus said he looked out on the crowd and it says he saw he saw this great crowd and he had compassion because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd and so he taught them the word of God and I think as Jesus looks out on Vancouver now he sees exactly the same and that's why we're so very glad to commission the St.

[32 : 26] Peter's fireside guys come up the front for a moment and the best dude we're we're we're we to we we wow De we we we