

TEXT: 1 John 4:1–6

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. ⁴ You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.— NIV84

Prayer of the Day:

O Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Good Shepherd who laid down your life for the sheep. Lead us now to the still waters of your life-giving Word that we may abide in your Father's house forevermore; for you live and reign with him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. Alleluia. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Alleluia. (John 10:14)

Sermon Text:

Good Shepherd Sunday, it is one of the most beloved Sundays of the church year. Even though the comparisons are not always the most complementary when it comes to sheep and the church, there is something about the imagery of Jesus as our Good Shepherd that fills the heart of the Christian with comfort and solace. Images of our Great Good Shepherd with the lamb draped over his shoulders abound within Christendom. But this Sunday we do not focus as much on the Shepherd Himself as we do the undershepherds who do the work in His Name within the New Testament Church, our pastors, our shepherds within the visible church on earth. They have come under more and more scrutiny over the years. We are more and more aware that they are sinful human beings just like the rest of us. Scandals have rocked churches regardless of denomination or Creed. But there is something more sinister that creeps into Christianity that poses a threat not only to the visible church on earth but the invisible as well as it assaults the heart and mind destroying the gift of faith so lovingly given by our God. So today, John reminds us all that there is a test we are to administer when it comes to our undershepherds and dear sheep, it is **A TEST WORTH ADMINISTERING.**

Listen again to the Word set before us in 1 John chapter 4, ¹ *Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* ² *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,* ³ *but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.* ⁴ *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.* ⁵ *They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them.* ⁶ *We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.*

In our lesson, the “spirits” to which John refers are spiritual teachers. We call them “pastors” in our little corner of Christianity. Though these leaders can also be our teachers, in our Lutheran Schools or in Sunday Schools, they can be parents who teach the word at home. “Spirits” could include any voice that teaches the Word. And these undershepherds are of great importance to the church. You see God in His wisdom has linked faith, that gift He gives to connect us to the saving work of Jesus, to visible means.

The Gospel in Word and in Sacraments. *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ*, God announced through Paul to the Romans. These are people who feed and nourish faith and who are then expected to be faithful in their handling of God's Word.

Unfortunately, as the lesson announces not all of them are. *Many false prophets have gone out into the world*, Paul tells us. So then we need to be able to check up on them. And dear friends please do. John gives us two touchstones we are to use as we do that.

The first is confession. That's really what is behind the Greek word translated as "acknowledge" in our lesson today. A true undershepherd of Christ Jesus will confess who Jesus is. Jesus is the Son of God who has come in the flesh to save fallen humanity from our sinfulness. This is the heart and core of Scripture to deny either of the two natures of Christ is to discard salvation. So John declares that if anyone should do this they are not Christian but antichristian speaking from a different spirit entirely that of the antichrist, alive and well in John's day even as it is in ours.

The second is ultimately God's Word. John says, *We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us*. The Apostles were humble men. Sinful just like us but they also knew for whom they spoke. They knew Christ, first hand having been trained and taught by Him over his three-year ministry here on earth. John was an eyewitness of the crucifixion and the resurrection. They knew who gave them the words they spoke and wrote. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon them in tongues of fire at Pentecost. They were not afraid to say, "Thus sayeth the Lord." They were not afraid of absolute truth.

Perhaps here is a good place to pause then. Notice who is given the responsibility of being the watchdogs of doctrine? It's not just your pastors, circuit pastor, district president, or synodical president though they are great blessings to the church when they are men who pass the test here administered. It is all of us! John says *You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world*. ⁵*They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them*.

This lesson always feels like a ton of bricks upon my shoulders. Perhaps it does to you as well. Do I always sound like Jesus? Am I a walking-talking mimic of the Shepherd under whom I serve? Or at times do I sound a little bit or even a lot like the world around me? My sin is always before me and I would imagine yours is before you too.

Dear Children of God, Lambs of the great Good Shepherd. Listen to the voice of Jesus. Get to know it well. Read the Book. May it be more beloved than anything or anyone in this world.

Permit a story for just a moment from my youth. Kids, in my day growing up we had this thing called a landline. It was a phone for the whole house. Cellphones weren't really in use yet. In fact, they were giant bricks that were not really practical. But anyway, the landline resulted in a reality that when you called someone, you didn't always know who was going to answer. It might be Dad, Mom, or one of the kids. When I was little everyone could tell by voice if it was my dad or my mom or myself when we answered. I had a squicky cute kid voice until around 7-8 grade. It was then that I noticed something strange. When I answered the phone people started assuming I was my father. I would constantly have to correct them as the bassier tones of my voice began to appear. Why am I telling you this? Because it moves the conversation back to where it belongs.

This is what a pastor should be but then it is what all of us should be. And there is only one way that this happens. As we administer the test, we submit ourselves to it so that it may drive us back to the voice of our Shepherd and all He has done for us. So dear sheep of a better Shepherd than I will ever be, May we be people so intimately connected to our Shepherd and His Word that we start to sound like Him. May we so regularly run to Him for the forgiveness He has won for us that the sinful mind of the world around us is crowded out of our conversation. May we so fill our hearts minds and mouths with His Holy Supper that the only voice people hear from us is His. Recalling our Baptisms, may the Name given us there be honored in thought, word, and deed in the world around me as we carry it there.