

Sermon 2010 Pentecost 16
Text: Ezekiel 34:11-24
Theme: "Finding Lost Sheep"
9-12-10

I was out sick this whole past week. There were, however, several perks. First I could not even swallow water Monday through Wednesday so the diet went really well this week. Second, I had the opportunity to sit and watch about 4 seasons of "Rescue Me" on Netflix. That's about 52 episodes and I gleaned innumerable sermon illustrations – so anticipate everything for the next 6 months to relate somehow to putting out fires.

Let the illustrations commence! The Church is not a club for saints but a firehouse from which to rescue sinners. On "Rescue Me," the firehouse is constantly battling city hall which is concerned with political correctness and appropriate quotas. One of the firemen says that when he pulls people from a burning building, he doesn't stop to ask how many women or men he has pulled, or how many Hispanics, blacks or Asian people. He just pulls any people he finds from the building that is on fire.

I think that is how God intends the Church to be. He never said to go and proclaim the Gospel to people who could benefit

the organization. He said proclaim it to everyone. I have heard many good Christian people discuss how much money the church was spending on a certain ministry that was not producing any revenue for the congregation. Schools are the favorite whipping boy in this category but youth and family ministry in general is a close second. Is that the point of what we do here? Do we seek out profitable ventures in which we can recruit families who will be assets to the overall organization? Or do we just keep running into the burning building and pulling lost souls out?

Our first question here is never what is most profitable for the institution or what is most convenient. Nor is our question, what is most fair to the membership. Our first question is what best fulfills our mission to help everyone we can reach to grow in Christ – either to come to know him for the first time or to grow stronger in our relationships with him. And every other question takes a backseat to that one. That may mean you have to work a little harder, or plan a little better, or sacrifice a little more but you are firefighters and the pay is lousy and the job is usually

thankless but you do what you do in answer to a higher calling than money or glory.

In our Gospel, Jesus reminds us that nothing in our world is more important than rescuing the lost. He uses the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin to illustrate how we drop everything in life to reclaim some valuable thing of ours that is lost. If we will drop everything for a coin or a farm animal, how much more will we do for a human being?

Jesus is the Good Shepherd but we are ordinarily his hands and his feet on this earth. We are the ones who drop our petty financial concerns and do what is necessary to reach those who are lost. We drop our turf wars over a building to make room for new people and new opportunities to find the lost in our community. We use all of our assets as resources for reaching a dying world and not a retirement fund so that we can relax on our forefather's hard work and quit giving.

We live in an important place and in an important time. Many people in our community have spent their lives pursuing vain goals: money, success, pleasure, relaxation, looks. We have

come out of a time in which a nice home, a good job and beautiful children made you good people. But people are starting to smell smoke. Suddenly the old value system is not working and our children are wandering away looking for something with meaning, something concrete. They are seeing homes they can never afford and proper jobs shrinking away from them. They have watched marriages in their families crumble one after the other. In other words, the lies with which many children were raised are coming to light. It turns out you can't be whatever you want. It turns out that happiness is not a 3 bedroom home in the suburbs, a recreational vehicle and both parents working 60 hours a week to support a vacation lifestyle. It turns out that "growing apart" and getting divorced is not healthy and in fact it does generational damage. We are ministering to a generation who smells the smoke of a culture on fire because it was built on paper. Many of them are lost in the fires of a quickly disintegrating world and need to be rescued. They are looking for something firm, something true. We have that to offer.

God promises us in Ezekiel that the Good Shepherd would come from the line of David and he did. But just as human beings have always been involved in delivering his grace, so we still are quite involved. I, the undershepherd, am called to lead you into pastures of His Holy Word and Sacrament to feed you and strengthen you. But why? So that you can live fat and happy in the sheep pen? Oh you know our God better than that. You are fed and nourished so that you will be powerful and I can lead you into the burning building. There are sheep out there who are lost and drinking foul water. They hear all kinds of religious messages in any given week that are like drinking the water downstream from a mining camp. They need the pure Word of God. They need to be washed in the cleansing water of Baptism. They need to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ himself.

Today is Rally Day. I would love to know what each of you thinks Rally Day is. I'm not even sure myself other than it is the name of the day we kick off the fall programs for Sunday School. It is one of those words that is meaningless to people caught in

the fire and yet we still use it like we use so much other over-tired jargon in the church. Imagine if the fireman stood outside the burning building and shouted "Hey! Come out! We have great donuts out here for you!"

We can have all the special celebrations we want for our membership but remember; that is not our primary objective. The point is to get into the burning world and haul out lost people because we know we have something here that will change their lives forever. Being part of the Church is not just another club membership. It is being grafted into a living body that slowly changes every goal you thought you had, every focus you thought you understood, every priority you thought you had. Being part of this organism called Church is all encompassing and all consuming and we gradually surrender ourselves to a current we can neither control nor predict and allow the Good Shepherd to pull us through this smoky, burning world and into his glorious paradise. AMEN.