Good morning and happy Mother’s Day to all you mothers out there. (Pause) This is completely off topic from what I’m going to talk about later but I want everyone here to stand up and give your mom a hug and tell her how much you appreciate everything she does for you. I know that is something I don’t tell my mom even close to as often as I should. Don’t worry; I’ll wait for all of you before moving on.

Now that that’s out of the way we can actually get this going. So around a month and a half ago I received an email from Emily titled Youth Sunday. When I saw this email initially I thought that it was just the annual Youth Sunday sign up where you list what part you want to have, which for me was always one of the main readings, yet somehow get stuck with the Prayers of the People. Don’t get me wrong I’m not saying that part isn’t important but it just isn’t the glamorous ones; I think we all can agree on that. This email though, was different. The email, unlike Emily’s typical ones, wasn’t sent to the like 45 other people that typically receive her emails. It was only sent to Ben Johnson and me. In it, Emily asked either of us to take on the challenge of writing the sermon for Youth Sunday. My first thought when I read that honestly was; why on earth am I being asked to write the sermon? I barely come to church due to Sunday Cross Country and Track practices and have as minimal of a biblical knowledge as you will find in a person that has attended church their whole life, which is much to the dismay of my mother. It’s honestly bad; I consistently think that I’m going to get written out of the will because I don’t know some bible story. Most recently, my mom and I were watching Jeopardy and a question came up about the Good Samaritan. She just like looked at me and waited for me to say the answer since she obviously knew it, but I had no clue. That led to her saying that she failed me as a parent so thankfully the next question asked about some useless baseball fact that I got right away which did get me some respect back. I digress though. This whole lack of biblical knowledge that I have really made me feel as if I didn’t deserve to write the sermon. I felt as if a sermon written by me wouldn’t live up to the standard set by the former members of the youth group that have written it in the past. I had this mindset for a few days and hoped that either Ben or someone else would do the sermon so I wouldn’t have to. Since I’m here today though, something clearly changed.

Around three days after I received the email from Emily I began to think that I could possibly write the sermon even though my biblical knowledge is rather limited. This change of heart was caused mainly when I thought back to the Confirmation classes that I went through two years ago. During those classes, I was assigned to read many of the more famous bible passages and stories. The most notable of these stories for me was the Lazarus story. This story for any of you that don’t know is about Jesus reviving a man named Lazarus from the dead. When I read that story, I honestly couldn’t get myself to believe it. I could not believe that Jesus would just decide to bring someone back from the dead because someone asked him to. I asked myself what did Lazarus do to deserve to be brought back from the dead and why was he more deserving of resurrection then other people? That story just did not fit with the idea of Jesus that I’ve always had. We’re always told that Jesus sees everyone as equals, so it would not make sense for him to bring one man back from the dead. As the classes went on I encountered many stories that I had similar problems with. I found many of the stories that we were told to read to just be too unlikely and irrational for me to accept as true as they are written. It got to the point where I almost told my mom that I couldn’t get confirmed since I felt like I couldn’t belong to something that I didn’t believe in fully. I knew that wasn’t an option though because church is way too important to her and leaving it would make me feel as if I failed her. This made me decide that I needed to completely change the way I look at the bible and the teachings of Jesus. Ever since then, I’ve interpreted Bible passages on a larger scale than they are written in the books. I look for the big picture in these passages rather than believing them literally. Take the Lazarus story for example. I now think that Lazarus wasn’t physically dead, only mentally dead; meaning that he had stopped seeing meaning in life anymore. Jesus’s teachings were able to make Lazarus see meaning in life again. Jesus was able to bring Lazarus back to life mentally since his teachings were that inspiring. I personally believe that this is a considerably more likely and believable interpretation of that story.

So now I’m going to use this subjective thinking process in order to give my interpretation of today’s gospel. When looking at the Good Shepherd gospel through an objective lens, one simply sees a story where Jesus compares his followers to the sheep that follow the Good Shepherd. Jesus’s followers and the Good Shepherd’s sheep follow their respective leader because their leader is just better than the other people that they could follow. I find that view to be very simplistic and not entirely representative of Jesus’s message. In this gospel passage, I believe that Jesus was trying to get across a message about leadership itself. Jesus wanted to show his followers that anyone can be a leader, as long as they lead for the right reasons. The Good Shepherd himself is Jesus’s symbol of the average person. There is really nothing special about him, but his sheep follow him because they feel a personal connection with him. His sheep know from past experiences that he will protect them and lead them away from harm. The Good Shepherd is able to lead because his sheep choose to follow him, which is what leadership truly is.

The form of leadership that the Good Shepherd represents in this passage is a trait that I look for in the people that I chose to emulate. During my time playing sports I’ve developed relationships with many of my teammates and coaches and would be willing to follow the lead of most of them. However, there are still those few that I have considered to be unfit leaders. One recent example of this was a member of my cross country team this year. Although he was one of the two seniors on varsity, I could not accept him as a leader because he was unable to make people on the team want to follow him. When this individual wasn’t voted captain, many people questioned our team’s decision because he seemed like an ideal candidate for captaincy. These questions though, came from people that only see leadership as a positional thing. Leadership, along with many other things in life, is a much bigger thing than it seems on the surface.

As I near the end of my junior year in high school, I’ve been put into a position where I am now looked at for leadership. I am now one of the most experienced members of my teams and school and have inherited the job of being a positive influence on underclassmen. In order to accomplish this task, I try to lead the same way that the Good Shepherd does. Over the past three years, I’ve tried to create relationships with my classmates and teammates in order to make them feel comfortable following my lead. I want these people to see me as a leader that actually cares about what they think and will consider their opinions. This will make me as effective of a leader as I possibly can be since it will make my peers follow me because they actually want to follow me; not just because I will be in a position of leadership. I hope to lead in this way through high school and the rest of my life.

So to tie things together, most things in both religion and life need to be considered on a deeper level than they appear. Almost everything that we encounter in our daily lives is more complex than it seems to be on the surface. I find that I only can truly understand something if I think about what it really means for a period of time. Once I question the true purpose of something, I find ways to better myself by correcting the accepted flaws of life. I think that if everyone just decided to question something that they’ve always accepted as fact once a day, we would see change in the world. So if I’ve bored you through this entire sermon and you’re only going to take one thing away from it let it be this; don’t accept everything as it appears since it is more than likely not what it seems to be.