

John 10:1-21

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

¹⁹Again the Jews were divided because of these words. ²⁰Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?” ²¹Others were saying, “These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?”

The Open Gates of Love May 7, 2017

A pastor was taking a group of parishioners on a tour of the Holy Land. He had just read them the parable of the good shepherd and was explaining to them that, as they continued their tour, they would see shepherds on the hillsides just as in Jesus' day. He wanted to impress the group, so he told them what every good pastor tells his people about shepherds. He described how, in the Holy Land, shepherds always lead their sheep, always walking in front to face dangers, always protecting the sheep by going ahead of them. He barely got the last word out when, sure enough, they rounded a corner and saw a man and his sheep on the hillside. There was only one problem: the man wasn't leading the sheep as the good pastor had said. No, he was behind the sheep and seemed to be chasing them. The pastor turned red.

Flabbergasted, he ran over to the fence and said, "I always thought shepherds in this region led their sheep -- out in front. And I told my people that a good shepherd never chases his sheep." The man replied, "That's absolutely true... you're absolutely right... but I'm not the shepherd, I'm the butcher!"

Jesus Good Shepherd and Jesus the Gate. What wonderful images we are given in these passages this morning. A Shepherd who will love and care for us; will comfort and provide; will walk with us in all the darkness of life and living. I don't know about you but it makes me feel safe when I read these stories. And while most of us have little or no experience with sheep other than watching the movie “Babe” fifty times with our children or grandchildren, or feeding sheep at the petting park, we still are drawn to this wonderful imagery aren't we. And no wonder I guess, because the biblical narrative is filled with stories of shepherds and sheep. Beginning with

Adam, who I guess would be the first caretaker of animals, followed by his son Able. There was Noah who became shepherd to all the animals of the world. Abraham who was a nomadic sheep herder as well as his children. Esau and then Jacob who became very adept at shepherding and sheep raising. Even Moses tended the sheep of his father-in-law before he was called into service.

In the book of Isaiah chapter 40 we read that this coming king “Will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” When we read the 23rd psalm we think of David who was anointed as the next king while still a boy shepherd and is remembered as the shepherd king of Israel. There were Shepherds at the birth of Jesus and it was to the shepherds that the angels sang. These are beloved images for us and rightly so.

But if we only dwell on those delightful images we may miss something critical for us today. That while Jesus as Shepherd and gate is an image that brings comfort, Jesus also tends to make us uncomfortable at every opportunity and as usual he tends to ruffle some feathers and here is why. This conversation we are listening in on is a continuation of a story that happened just prior to this. If you recall in chapter nine, Jesus had just healed the man who was born blind. The Pharisees are not happy about this because whoever did it, did so on the Sabbath, and secondly, they can’t figure out who could or who would do it. There is all kinds of drama as they drag the poor man who was blind in front of them for questioning. They finally send him away, condemning him for thinking, and start their hunt for Jesus. Jesus then accuses them of being blind due to their own self-righteousness, which leads us into this passage we have today where Jesus talks about the difference between a good shepherd and those who are hired hands, thieves and bandits, or as I call them, “bad shepherds.”

Jesus is making a very strong statement to those who think of themselves as the anointed shepherds of Israel. He goes on to imply by his analogy to them that they have not been good shepherds of the people. They have created barriers and obstacles, rules and unnecessary burdens on the poor and needy, they have been wolves in sheep’s clothing so to speak. That they are the thieves and bandits. And being good students of the scriptures, they can probably hear the voice of the prophet Ezekiel where he too cast judgement on those who were supposed to be good shepherds when he says in chapter 34:

“Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.”

He goes on to say that God will demand his sheep from their hands and he will put a stop to their abuse. The passage concludes with these promises, “For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from the places to which they have been scattered...I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.” It goes on to sound very much like the 23 psalm.

Jesus is saying that he is the good shepherd, the one who will seek out the lost and scattered. He is the way, the gate, the light, the voice that the sheep listen to. And perhaps the most compelling verse in this passage to me is verse 16 where Jesus says, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” It’s a verse that we may easily overlook, but

in light of Jesus' life and ministry, it strikes me as profound. Because it seems to me that Jesus' ministry reflects over and over again his love and care for those we would consider, "the other." His life was filled with those who would be considered unclean, unholy, ethnically untouchable outsiders, those scattered from God, and he brings them into the circle of God's kingdom demonstrating over and over again what faithful shepherds do by including all those whom he encountered.

Such as, Samaritan woman who found living water. A Samaritan leper who was the only one to come back and thank him. Another Samaritan who gave his time and resources to help a beaten stranger on the road. A woman caught in adultery. A centurion whose faith was greater than any he had seen so far. A blind man. A dead man. A mad man. A woman of questionable profession who washed his feet with costly perfume and tears. Jesus sought the outsiders. Those outside the circle of respectability and those overlooked and abandoned by the anointed priests of the temple, those who considered themselves shepherds of the people. Jesus sought those who we might consider to be not part of the flock.

It certainly has me thinking about who I consider being "the other flock". Who are we choosing not to see as our sisters and brothers in Christ, who came to save all the world? Where are we creating walls instead of opening gates both in the church and in the community? How are we making safe pastures for those who need them? How are we listening to the Shepherd's voice?

You see we live in such a time both culturally and politically, that you don't have to look very far to see who is being excluded, even though they too hear the voice of the Master. There are countless women and men and children who hear His voice and desire to be welcomed into the family of Love, to be supported and nurtured and shepherded. But they are being shut out and persecuted because of the color of their skin, the language they speak, their sexual orientation, their religious beliefs or culture, their country of origin, their social status, or their political views.

We see in the news those who call themselves Christians, who, rather than serving the least of these create rules that justify their not serving. They judge and condemn, they build walls and close doors, calling themselves righteous and justified, making statements about *religious freedom*, all the while failing to see that they do the very opposite of the Jesus they claim to follow. The One who laid down his life, by his own choosing, for all the "Others" of the world. The one who holds the gate of love open for all. And I believe he expects us to do the same.

Because this kingdom is expanding. It is not finished yet and there are still others who will join us along the way. Others who have heard his voice and for whom Jesus is the shepherd. Others who are moving toward the Gate known as Jesus, where they may find safe pasture for their lives. He has other sheep in other pastures. Strangers to us, maybe even foreigners to us. People of different cultures and different understandings of God. But it makes no difference to Jesus because he is the gate, just as we are all gateways to God's love, and he challenges us to keep the gate open. To keep letting those who hear his voice into the pasture, and then when they are ready, to lead them out to share his great and amazing love.

The King of Love my Shepard is, His goodness faileth never. I nothing lack if I am His and He is mine forever.

Let us pray