

Entering Through the Gate
A Sermon on John 10:1-21
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2020

Introduction

The Fourth Sunday of Easter is called Good Shepherd Sunday. The discourse on the Good Shepherd in John 10 is always the gospel lesson and the psalm reading is always Psalm 23.

The clergy has taken over the shepherd imagery and applied it to themselves. The English word *pastor* derives from the Latin noun *pastor*, which means shepherd, and from the Latin verb *pscere*, which means to lead to pasture. Many bishops carry a crozier, which is intended to remind people of the staff that shepherds carry. It symbolizes that the bishop is the leader of the flock.

The shepherd imagery originally comes from today's text. It says that we are sheep and that Jesus is our shepherd. Mary and I may be the pastors of this congregation, but Jesus is the shepherd of the whole Christian flock.

First Move: Differing Responses to Jesus

Jesus has several long speeches in the Gospel of John; they are called discourses because they contain authoritative teaching. Chapter 10 is a discourse that reflects on what took place in the episode with the blind beggar in Chapter 9.

I preached on the blind beggar at the end of March. Scholars believe that it reflects conditions in John's community at the time he was writing his gospel. Jews who followed Jesus were being kicked out of synagogues in John's day.

The story of the blind beggar is about different responses to Jesus. Jesus heals a man who has been blind from birth. The man's understanding of Jesus progresses throughout the story. At the end of the story, he says that he believes that Jesus is the Son of Man, and he bows down before Jesus. The Judeans and the Pharisees deny that a miracle happened, and they launch an investigation to prove that it is fake. The blind man's parents are afraid of the Judeans and the Pharisees and deny that they know anything about the healing. They tell them to go ask the blind man themselves. John is encouraging his community to come out of hiding and confess Jesus openly.

In today's text Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and the Judeans who were conducting the interrogations of the blind man and his parents. The last three verses

of today's text say that Jesus' discourse provokes a schism among the Judeans. "How can he be possessed by a demon; can a demon open the eyes of the blind?"

The first words in today's text are "Amen, amen." This is a signal that Jesus is getting ready to say something important. He is taking the discussion to a deeper theological level.

Jesus says that the true shepherd is the one who enters through the gate. The imagery of a shepherd is a little strange to us. We live in the city and not many of us grew up on a farm.

The sheep in Biblical days are put in a pen at night. The pen is a large open area that is enclosed by a fence. A pen for sheep is called a fold. Putting the sheep in a fold keeps them from wandering off and protects them from wild animals. The fold referred to in today's text is probably attached to a house on the outskirts of a village. Several shepherds put their flocks in one fold. They hire a gatekeeper to watch the sheep at night while they sleep.

Only robbers and thieves will climb over the fence to get to the sheep. The shepherd, the rightful master of the sheep, will be recognized by the gatekeeper and allowed to enter through the gate.

Once the shepherd is in the fold, he calls the sheep by name and they recognize his voice. John's Easter story reflects this: Mary mistakes Jesus as the gardener until he calls her name and she recognizes his voice.

The shepherd leads the sheep out of the fold, and they follow because they know his voice. They know that the shepherd will protect them and feed them. The sheep will flee from a stranger because they do not know his voice; they don't know what his intentions are.

The Gospel writer describes these sayings in the first five verses as a proverb or a figure of speech. The Judeans and the Pharisees do not understand what Jesus means by this proverb. To them, it is a riddle wrapped in an enigma. Jesus spends the rest of the discourse unwrapping the riddle. It is about who is recognized as the shepherd of the flock and the relationship of the shepherd to the flock.

Jesus takes the theological discussion still deeper by beginning with another Amen saying: "Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate of the sheep." This could be an allusion to Psalm 118:20: "This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it." This refers to gates of the Temple. John is describing Jesus as the door to salvation: "If someone enters through me, he will be saved."

The sheep will find pasture through Jesus. This is an allusion to Psalm 23: "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters."

There are several long discourses in the Gospel of John; in these discourses Jesus offers eternal life, living water, the bread of life and pasture. John is describing Jesus as the source of life. That is a fundamental Jewish belief about God, and John is attributing it to Jesus.

John criticizes the ones who came before Jesus as thieves and bandits. He says that they came in order to steal and slaughter and destroy the flock.

This is an allusion to Ezekiel 34 where God installed kings and priests to shepherd the people of Israel, but they were false shepherds. “They fattened themselves on the flocks and clothed themselves with the wool.” God as the true shepherd will gather the lost sheep of Israel:

I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed,
and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak,
but the fat and the strong, I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

John may be comparing the Pharisees to the false shepherds in Ezekiel 34. There was a dispute in John’s day about who should lead Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. John’s community was bitter toward the Pharisees because they had rejected Jesus and kicked them out of the synagogues. John believes they are slaughtering and destroying the Christian community.

Jesus closes the I am the gate passage by saying, “I came in order that they might have life and have [it] abundantly.” This is another allusion to Psalm 23, and it is further explanation of what it means to have eternal life. Jesus is the gate through we go to find green pastures.

Jesus says, “I am the Good Shepherd.” It could also be translated as, “I am the True Shepherd.” The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep and knows his sheep. The shepherd puts the welfare of the sheep ahead of his own.

Jesus says that he also has sheep that are not from this pen and that it is necessary for him to lead them, too. When they hear his voice, they will become one flock, one shepherd. Jesus will bring all the scattered sheep back together. He will even bring in sheep from other flocks, which probably means Gentiles. The Gentiles and the Judeans will come together as one flock. This is Isaiah’s vision of the Gentiles streaming to God’s holy mountain to worship God together with the Jews. John reinterprets it as a vision of Christian unity.

This discourse caused division among the audience. Confrontation with Jesus provokes a divided response in the Gospel of John. Some Judeans say that Jesus must

be possessed by a demon, while other Judeans see God at work in the healing of the blind man.

Second Move: We Long for Community

This text is a challenge to us because many people don't think of themselves as sheep and don't think they need a shepherd. Part of our resistance to having someone watch over us is that we are so individualistic. We like to think we have more agency than sheep. That is part of our heritage as descendants of Western Europeans. Sociologists tell us that all other cultures in the world today are dyadic or collectivistic. We think of me first. Other cultures think of the group first.

We don't need a shepherd unless we are part of a flock. Sometimes we are part of a flock. Community and institutions enrich our lives. We need a balance between individualism and community.

Public schools are one of the few institutions that still builds community. People care about the schools in their neighborhoods; people care about the schools they attend. I am forever a part of the Enid High School class of 1975. I remember when I was at my graduation ceremonies, looking around the room and thinking that I knew the names of all 521 seniors in the graduating class.

I took Mary to visit Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa this summer. It was where I went to college. I wanted her to see it because that institution shaped me; it was a big part of my life.

The pandemic has helped bring people together. As David Brooks wrote in his latest column in the New York Times, looking at the world through the prism of politics emphasizes division. We go on FaceBook to have arguments with strangers about politics. The national emergency has brought people to focus on the common goal of protecting ourselves and protecting other people from the virus. All other issues have faded into the background. Even those of us who are fortunate enough to be young and in good health know that they can transmit the virus to someone more vulnerable. In an ABC News/Ipsos poll last week, 98 percent of Democrats and 82 percent of Republicans support social-distancing rules. The pandemic reminds us that we share many values with our neighbors, even if we disagree on politics.

People in the last generation have lost faith in their political institutions. The pandemic has revived our faith somewhat. A new poll shows that 66% of people across the country approve of how their governors have coordinated the response to the pandemic. That poll was taken before some of the states started reopening. Mayors score even higher. David Holt may be the most popular politician in

Oklahoma. People are willing to make sacrifices if their leaders level with them and act in a non-partisan way for the common good.

Church is another institution that builds community and shapes people. We are social animals. We come to church, looking for a community to connect with. Church still gives us that small-town feeling where everyone knows our name. We share our joys and concerns with each other every week and pray for each other even in these times of social distancing. We *are* a family here.

Church is not something you can do alone. Many people who are unchurched say that they are spiritual but not religious. I don't know what that means. I guess they believe in God but they don't believe in church. That's fair. Many people have had bad experiences in church. The church *has* hurt people. Those are churches who steal and slaughter and destroy; they are led by thieves and bandits. A *true* church helps people on their faith journeys. We hold each other accountable. We encourage each other.

Worshipping God is not something you can do alone. It is more than Jesus and me. We worship as a community. We can worship together even when we are physically apart. We show our love for God by loving one another, even when we are apart. The high point of worship for me is always communion. We come together as a people of God to share a meal with each other and with Christ, our host. I am so looking forward to worshipping together in this sanctuary again so that we can come forward together for communion. When I look around the room and see whom I am sharing communion with, that's when I most feel the presence of Christ. I know you have been trying to live faithfully each week. I feel Christ through you.

Third Move: We Long for a Shepherd

If we see ourselves as part of a community, the question we should be asking is not, "Do I need a shepherd?" but, "Does the flock need a shepherd?"

Every group needs a leader. A leader helps bring order and focus to the group. A leader reflects the values of the group. Jesus is a unique leader. We reflect his values. He is what keeps the church together. We come in with diverse backgrounds and life experiences and political beliefs. Christ is what we have in common.

Because we are Christians we know that we should be humble. We know that we should love our neighbor. We know that we should turn the other cheek. We know that we should help the poor. We know we should eat with tax collectors and sinners. We know that we should have an interior life with God. We know that God wants us to have life and have it abundantly.

The beauty of the Gospel of John is that it emphasizes the centrality of Christ. Jesus is the Christ because he shows us what God like. As Christians, we believe that if God were walking amongst us, God would look and act like Jesus. God has authorized Jesus to enter through the gate and lead the flock.

Jesus pulls us out of our safe little cocoons and brings us into community with each other. When we are part of a community, we start thinking about what is good for the community instead of only about what is good for me.

Jesus had a big vision of community. He saw all people as children of God. Not just the people he went to school with. Not just the people in his village. Not just the people in his political tribe. His community included people from other flocks, the Samaritan woman at the well and the blind beggar.

Reinhold Niebuhr is one of the great theologians of the 20th century. He wrote a book called *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in 1932. His thesis is just as valid today as it was in 1932: individual people are more moral than groups of people. Groups nearly always pursue their own self interests instead of the common good, what is good for all the people. Political groups today nakedly pursue their own power and self interest. Sometimes they try to camouflage it and promote it as if it is in everyone's interest. Anyone outside the group can easily see what is really driving their agenda.

A group tends to look inward and reinforce its own beliefs and prejudices. The true church is unique among institutions because of Jesus. Jesus forces us to look outward. Jesus asks us to look at the world from God's perspective instead of our own. When we are listening for God's call, it's hard to distinguish God's voice from our own voice. A good rule of thumb is, if God is calling you to something, you are probably going someplace you wouldn't ordinarily go.

Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God is just as radical today as it was 2,000 years ago. Gandhi said that the nonviolence movement is still in its infancy; it is in the same stage as electricity was in Edison's day.

We are also in our infancy in developing a spiritual life. The Protestant Reformation largely rejected the mystics of the church as too Catholic-y. Thomas Merton helped modern folks appreciate contemplation and rediscover the mystical life. It is a way for us to know God and strengthen our connection with the sacred.

Jesus has much to teach us about nonviolence and contemplation.

Conclusion

The good shepherd leads us to the kingdom of God. It's a place where all the sheep have water and bread and pasture. John calls it eternal life. We can have it right now if we believe in Jesus and follow him.

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