

March 31, 2019

John 10: 1-11

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Good Shepherd”

I drive by sheep everyday. It seems out of place in this suburban world in which we live, the farm at the bottom of the hill on the other side of the river, but sheep can be seen grazing as the traffic rushes by. Of course, there's more sheep just to our west, at our church member Marge Bennett's place. Marge has kept sheep for a long time and when we drive toward town from here we might catch a glimpse of her small flock grazing in one of the pastures. You wouldn't think this could be given how long it's been since this area was rural territory but either direction we go from this church building sheep are nearby. Seeing those animals has not regularly been a spiritual symbol for me and I doubt they've been a spiritual touch stone for you, but in light of the gospel reading for today I'm thinking they should be. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” and the fact of the matter is where there is a shepherd there will be sheep. So, if Jesus is saying something about himself when he takes on the shepherding identity then he's saying something about us, too. If he's the shepherd that makes us the sheep, and that's not the most flattering self-image, to be honest about it. Because this is our theme for the morning, I stopped to visit with Marge a few days ago and got educated about sheep husbandry. Marge and her son, Mike, shared stories about their sheep keeping that had us laughing at times and made me reflect on how we've probably romanticized the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep. Mike began by saying, “If you want to understand sheep just imagine putting their stomachs where their brains are because the only thing they think about: when the next meal is coming, where it will happen, and how much food they are going to get.” This is no hobby or fun pastime, raising sheep. A shepherd has to be diligent. Sheep need cared for because they can't care for themselves and they aren't particularly grateful for what's done on their behalf. Their way of showing you attention, I've learned, is often by knocking you to the ground with a firm head butt when you aren't looking. They are often dirty and smelly and stubborn and dull, and if they didn't provide at least a small financial payback it's doubtful anyone would decide to care for sheep at all. So, this city boy learned something about sheep and I want to thank Marge for that, and it makes me reevaluate what I've always thought about the image of Jesus as our shepherd. We think of the paintings that show a confident and calm Jesus holding a pure and gentle lamb on his shoulders but that picture doesn't quite capture the truth. Shepherding was, and still is, a hard and thankless job. Sheep are not pets but more a demanding project, and the decision to care for them requires undying patience and commitment. In this light, let's think about what Jesus is saying about himself and about us. This is, of course, the point, what Jesus is saying about him and us. It's about Jesus and us, our relationship with him, our shared life with the one who is both our Lord and our Savior. We talk often about our commitment to Christ but let's be aware of Christ's commitment to us. There's nothing easy about it but Jesus promises to care for us, even when we are stubborn and ungrateful. Jesus, like a shepherd leads us, and it's not only where he's leading us but what he makes possible in us that is the source of good news for our lives. Let's turn back to the gospel reading to experience the truth of Jesus' words.

The Lenten study many in our congregation are involved in is focusing on the “I am” sayings of Jesus. In the tenth chapter of John's Gospel, before Jesus identifies himself as the shepherd he says, “I am the gate for the sheep.” (John 10:7) Every sheepfold has a way in and out. Even in this modern day, if we were to visit the outlying areas surrounding the city of Jerusalem, we would see crude sheep pens constructed out of stones that provide a place for the animals to be gathered safely for the night. These sheepfolds don't have an actual gate but a break in the stone wall through which the animals can move. We know, historically, shepherds would lay down across that opening. This meant that through the night the sheep would stay put and any other creature or potential predator would be kept out. With the shepherd laying down across the opening no one and no thing could come or go without running into the physical presence of the shepherd. “I am the gate,” Jesus said. This means every movement of our lives, including every experience, threat or otherwise, can not take place without encountering his presence. Think about what this means for us. The other day I responded to a member of our church who wrote a daily devotional in our Lenten Booklet. The gist of the message was how God's grace is at work in the work we do. I thanked the person for what they shared and I wrote in my email to them, “I needed to hear that word today.” The person wrote back, grateful for my note and then asked why I needed a reminder about God's grace. That was a good question. It made me realize that I often go through my days wrapped up in the things that have to be done, and I know you are not so different from me when it comes to this. Every day we have agendas, responsibilities, and things that demand our attention and our effort. It's easy to get absorbed with what we want to happen or with what's happening around us and we stop being aware of where God is in all of it. I needed to be reminded, and don't you need reminded, too, that nothing in which we're involved is disconnected from God. God isn't holding a stockpile of grace and love off to the side somewhere, waiting to spread that goodness into our lives when the time is right. It's like what Jesus, the

gate, is telling us. In all of our movement through life, in our coming in and our going out, Jesus is there. Christ is the constant grace-filled presence of God. What we do and even the things that done to us are filtered through God's presence. Even when we are not aware, God is there. So, why not open our eyes to see it? Let's be aware that all of our daily movements through life are touched by the presence of Jesus? We, the flock of the good shepherd, are gathered into God's protective care and not only this, wherever we go and whatever we do, we pass through the gracious love of our Lord. We can't help but be encouraged to know this is true.

There's something else about Jesus as the gate that speaks powerfully to us. In ancient Jerusalem there was an important sheepgate in the wall that surrounded the city. As now, sheep in that time were a commodity. Their wool was used for clothing. They were a source for meat, fattened up to provide food for a hungry people. And then, as important as all other ways sheep were used, they were offered as a sacrifice to God. The temple altar in Jerusalem was the center of the people's commitment to God. Sheep were brought to the holy city where they were prepared as an offering to God and this sacrifice reflected the people's commitment to their covenant of faith. The animals were led through the Sheep Gate, meaning the destination for the sheep was death. That gate led to the place where their lives were given and their blood was spilled. When Jesus says he is the gate for the sheep the people must have called to mind the Sheep Gate in the city wall where animals would meet their end.

The good news can not be more obvious. With Jesus, we not only go in through the Sheep Gate but we go out and when we go out we find abundant life. Because Jesus is the gate we are rescued from what would be our certain end and we are led out into a life that is so beautifully described by the poetry of Psalm 23. We find cool waters, green pastures, protection through the darkest valley, and a safe dwelling place with God forever. Jesus is never just one thing for us. He is all things for us. And so, the one who is the gate becomes the one who is the good shepherd, leading us, as the psalm says, in the paths of righteousness.

Real sheep just aren't aware of the importance of the shepherd in their lives but it's not that way with us. Whenever we are passing through times in our lives that seem dark and fearful or whenever we're certain there's no way out and no place to go, Jesus is with us to protect and to guide. The scripture says that listening for and knowing his voice is the key. How is the voice of Jesus calling to you? Is it in the quiet moments, when a thought comes to you that centers you or gives you peace? Is it through someone else, who calls or visits or is with you at just the right moment when you need it most? Is it through our worship or our shared mission or knowing that when we say Christ's love is for everyone that includes you? Where is Jesus calling you to move out from where you are so that life will be more full and flowing? The good shepherd wants this for you, of that you can be certain.

It may be that we'll need reminded of this from time to time. So, if you're ever traveling from here to the east and drive by the big farm at the bottom of the hill or if you drive west and pass by Marge's place, let the sheep of the pasture be your spiritual reminder of how great is the love of our Lord. Amen.