

We are Sheep

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John 10:1-10

“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. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.

9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

BE CAREFUL WHO YOU LISTEN TO

Who do you listen to the most?

Whose voice is most prominent in your life?

We listen to many voices.

Maybe we're trying to lose some weight. We might listen religiously to Dr. Oz. We'll try the latest diet. We'll buy books on cooking and health.

Or maybe we're a golfer and like 90 percent of all golfers we slice the ball too much. We want to fix our swing. So, we'll listen to the golf channel and read golf digest and maybe even go see our local pro in order to get better.

Perhaps some of you want a better job. You see on the TV an advertisement for a for profit school. You wonder if it would be to our advantage to enroll and have a better way of life. You listen to that voice on the TV that says you could have a different life, and it sounds good.

Maybe you're worried about having enough money in retirement. You listen to those voices that promise to help us get our financial house in order and make a plan. You wonder if it might be time to see a financial advisor.

Now there's nothing wrong with listening to the voices of experts when we have a problem. There's nothing wrong with trying to lose some weight, play better golf or have a more secure future.

But, we have to be cautious. Some honestly want to help us, but some just want to exploit our needs and desires.

That new driver is not going to turn me into Tiger Woods. Going on the grapefruit diet is not going to lower my blood sugar. And some financial advisors are more interested in their own retirement than mine.

THE VOICE OF THIEVES

We have to be careful what voices we listen to, and this is especially true when it comes to faith.

Did you read Scott Maxwell's editorial this Friday? Scott was talking about the Supreme Court's decision to allow prayer before public meetings. He said that he was concerned.

No, he wasn't worried about upsetting the atheists. He was worried about upsetting God. Scott wrote, "I've seen legislators invoke God's name right before defunding services for the sick and the disabled. So much for tending to the least among us."

Public piety is often mixed with personal and political corruption.

Scott closed his column with a quote from the Bible, "They profess to know God, but they deny Him by their actions." (Titus 1:6)

Today's lesson from John is about those who use piety as a smoke screen for personal corruption. Jesus warns his disciples about those who do not enter the sheepfold by the gate but try to climb in another way.

If I see that my patio door has been shattered, I know what has happened. A thief has broken into my house. I need to call the police. And if you see someone trying to climb into the sheepfold you know that they're up to no good.

What was Jesus talking about with this example?

He was talking about the corrupt political and religious leaders of his day.

BLIND LEADERS

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today, Jesus had the temerity to heal man who was blind from birth *on the Sabbath*.

And the religious authorities did not like this one bit. The Sabbath was a day for rest. Healing is hard work. If you want to heal someone you can do it on some other day.

This is the logic of those who use their faith as a way to control others. It's not about doing good. It's about following the rules.

They had taken God's gift, the notion that everyone needs a Sabbath, a time to rest and they had turned it into a burden. "You better watch what you do on the Sabbath. You might do too much, and God will get you for that."

But, in this case the religious leaders had a problem. A man born blind had been healed. This was unprecedented. They couldn't attack Jesus unless they could discredit this miracle.

They tried. They suggested that the man wasn't really blind. They threatened his parents. They tried everything. But, finally they just gave up and kicked him out. "You were born in sin. What right do you have to lecture us? Get lost."

Jesus sought out the man they had cast out and led him to faith. And then Jesus had some rather harsh words for the religious leaders. He said they thought they could see, but they were really blind.

The religious leaders responded, “Are you talking about me?”

And Jesus said, “If the shoes fits ...”

Then Jesus launched into our lesson for today with this story about thieves who try to raid the sheepfold by coming in another way. This was aimed directly at these religious leaders who wanted to pray in public and make a big deal about Sabbath keeping.

But, they neglected the more important task of compassionately caring for those who have needs.

They were not really religious leaders at all. They were thieves who wanted to harm God’s children. You could tell by what they said and what they did. They didn’t enter the sheepfold by the gate. They tried to climb over the wall and get in.

HEARING JESUS’ VOICE

Metaphorically speaking we are sheep.

God cares for us sheep. The Lord is our shepherd. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

But, we need to be realistic.

We live in a world filled with thieves. We live in a world where people want to steal what is most important from us, and they sometimes use religious language to make their case.

How can we avoid falling prey to these thieves in shepherd’s clothing?

We listen to the voice of Jesus.

We do more than just pray to Jesus in our public meetings. We listen to what Jesus actually says about those who are sick, about those who are overcome by guilt, and about those who are filled with sorrow.

Jesus' sheep need to hear Jesus' voice, and they need to follow that voice.

I'm told that in the Middle East shepherds have a unique call. And instead of pushing the sheep along from behind, they lead the sheep. The sheep follow their unique call and that keeps the flock together.

The thing that will keep us together and protect us in times of trouble is listening to the voice of Jesus. This is something that we need to do together.

We have to discern if the voice we hear is the voice of a stranger or the voice of our Shepherd

And we have to learn to run from those who suggest that there is another way than the way taught by Jesus. We run from those thieves because we believe that Jesus is the way, the truth and life.

We believe that the life that Jesus calls us to live is the only life worth living.

We believe that the abundant life is not measured by how much we own but by how much we love and how much we serve others in his name.

JUDGEMENT VERSUS GRACE

The disciples didn't get what Jesus was talking about.

It's understandable. The disciples' minds and hearts were shaped by the culture in which they lived.

They didn't believe that they were sheep. They believed that they were good, upright Jewish citizens who could save themselves if only they did the right thing and said the right words.

By the way when Jesus came across the man born blind, the disciples demonstrated their theology by the question they asked Jesus. They asked, "Who sinned? This man or his parents."

In other words they had a very simplistic worldview. They believed that the good were rewarded and the bad were punished. If this man was blind somebody had to be at fault.

We see this same kind of thinking today.

The poor are poor because they don't work hard enough. The sick are sick because they don't take care of themselves. Those who are guilty of some crime are moral failures.

We try to understand the world by assigning blame.

Job's "comforters" are a good example of this kind of thinking. They told Job that he must have done something really bad to have such bad luck. He needed to repent and maybe God would quit persecuting him.

But, the assumptions of Job's friends were wrong. Job hadn't done anything wrong.

WE ARE SHEEP

Sometimes we do contribute to our own misery.
Sometimes we are judged for what we do.
But, sometimes this is not the case.

The important point is this. Right or wrong, in good times or bad we are dependent upon the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

We are sheep.

And sheep are helpless.
Sheep tend to wander where they shouldn't go.
Sheep are not too smart.

I know. Thinking of ourselves as sheep is an assault on what we want to believe about ourselves.

We don't mind thinking about ourselves as God's valuable assistants.

We don't mind thinking of ourselves as competent, practical hands on Christians who know how to get things done for the Kingdom of God.

But, that's not who we are. The Bible tells us that we are sheep. And sheep cannot save themselves.

Oh, we may be able to think of ourselves as people who have it all together for a while. But, the time comes for all of us when we realize just how vulnerable and weak we really are.

Then we know. We are sheep, helpless and feeling quite alone.

THE LORD IS OUR SHEPHERD

But, in our hour of need Jesus gives us something to hold on to. We sheep have one thing going for us.

We are not alone. The Lord is our shepherd.

The Lord calls and we follow.

The Good Shepherd leads us through the valley of the shadow of death. The Good Shepherd gives us what we need when we need it.

The Good Shepherd is merciful and forgiving toward us. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for us.

The late Andrew Roy was a missionary to China who opted to remain after the Communist takeover in 1950.

He was placed under house arrest and his interrogators attacked the person of Jesus by noting that Jesus told of a shepherd who left "the flock" and went after the one who was lost.

The communists argued that such an act was utterly foolish and irresponsible. The collective mass was all that mattered.

Roy defended Jesus by pointing out that when the good shepherd in the parable goes after the lost sheep he gives ultimate security to the rest of the flock.

Each sheep thereby knows, “If I get lost, he will come after me.”

On the other hand, if the good shepherd cares only for the flock as a whole and does not put himself out for the lost sheep, each sheep is left with the ultimate insecurity.

They will think, “If I fall one step behind, he will leave me to die.”

Fear not little flock. We have a Shepherd, a Savior who will not leave us behind. Today’s lesson teaches us that we have a Shepherd who cares for every lamb that has been entrusted to him.

He guards the gate of our life with his own life. And when we experience a breakdown on the road of life, he comes to us. He knows our name. And we know his.

We might not know where we are going. We might not know how we will handle some great problem or fill some aching need.

But, God knows. The Lord is our shepherd.

He gives us the cool water. He protects us from our enemies. He is with us and for us in this life and the next.

In life and in death we belong to God.

For those who are traveling through the valley of the shadow of death, the hope of a Shepherd who leads the way is a welcome image.

Whenever I do a funeral the 23rd Psalm is almost always requested. We might not like the idea of being dumb dependent sheep when times are good, but very few reject the Shepherd’s care in the time of desperate need.

GOOD NEWS NOT GOOD ADVICE

In seminary my professors constantly warned us about turning good news into good advice.

I’ve come to appreciate that more and more through the years. I’ve come to see that preaching is not about trying to convince people to do more and be more.

Preaching is simply giving people the good news that God loves us, all of us with no strings attached.

And out of gratitude we serve that loving God.

Service is a natural response to the gospel, the good news. But, it is not what saves us.

In fact when we try to save ourselves through service we inevitably turn Christianity into a religion of judgment instead of a religion of grace. We use religion as a way to get what we want instead of listening for the call of the Shepherd.

But, when we listen for the voice of the Shepherd in good times and bad, we live a life that is abundant.

We live a life that is much more than we could have imagined or hoped for.

Lord, help us hear the voice of the Shepherd for we are your sheep. Lead us by the still waters.

Amen.