

March 26    The Good Shepherd

John 10:1-15

When I was serving a small church in Colorado, while attending seminary, I preached about Jesus being the good shepherd and how our task is to be good sheep. I thought it was an excellent analogy until one of my former congregants came up to me after church and said, "Don't ever tell me to be a sheep. Sheep are about the dumbest animal God ever created. I was a shepherd and couldn't wait to be done with them. I was so glad to get the opportunity to move on to cattle. Cattle have brains." Since that time, I have always been a little reluctant to think of faithful people as sheep. I understand the analogy of why Jesus is and should be our shepherd but I want to stop there. Yet, the author of our book makes the point that we need to see ourselves as sheep, if we are to truly understand the two "I am" statements we are focusing on today. Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd" and "I am the Gate or Door." These sayings reveal much about God's care for us. So, with a nod to people who question the intelligence of sheep, today let us hear what Jesus is sharing with us.

Sheep were usually kept in sheep pens that were attached to the house of the shepherd. These were an enclosure with high walls and just one entrance that had a locking door. This allowed the shepherd to protect the sheep at night without having to be with them. A good shepherd would often inspect each sheep as it entered through the gate. The gate represented security. The gate also was where they went out to find pastures. The gate leads to nourishment and joy.

Here is how we are like sheep. We spend our lives traveling through a similar doorway. Every one of us is constantly moving between a search for familiarity and security, and freedom and new life. Think about all of the ways we like the security of the known. If you don't think this is you, answer these questions? Do you sit in or near the same place in church every Sunday? Do you tend to go to the same restaurant much of the time and order the same thing? At home does everyone know which is your chair? Does your family know what you want for Christmas or for your birthday without even having to ask? Most of us have well-worn paths of security and familiarity. It is partially how we are wired.

We also seek for pastures, places of excitement and enjoyment. Have you spent time daydreaming about or making plans for a vacation? Have you tried a new restaurant, just because? Are you contemplating a new car even though the one you have is perfectly fine? Have you done something new, gone somewhere new just for the fun of it? Security and familiarity can become a prison of sorts if we don't also have change. We like a little excitement and newness, some more than others! Like a sheep we regularly come in and go out. We are in a constant flow between our search for familiarity and predictability and at the same time seeking newness, excitement, and a break from routine.

We need to understand that this creates some tension within us and within all organizations we are a part of, especially the church. We want to come to church and sit in our accustomed place and sing our favorite songs. Yet, we want the church to attract new people. We then get upset when these new people do things in new ways or sit in our spots. Or we decide to risk and do something new in the church. We are excited because we have thought about it and prayed about it before stepping forth. Then we get frustrated because there is a whole bunch of the flock bleating from the security of the sheep pen telling us to get back inside!

Coming in and going out. Many passages in the Bible speak of this. God knows our need for joy, abundance, and feeling alive as well as our need for security, comfort and protection. And Jesus, the Good Shepherd, watches over us. Let us see how the other "I am" statement helps us see that care.

In John 10 we find two different images of Jesus, depending on the translation. Some use gate while others use door. Both images convey important understandings about God's care. First of all, if we look at Jesus as the Gate we are thinking of sheep pens near the house. If people did not enter through the gate, they had to climb over the wall, which most likely meant they were thieves. That doesn't mean that they want to hurt the sheep. They just wanted to steal them. They simply used sheep for their own gain or advantage. Have you ever known people like that? They were not out to cause you harm, but they didn't really care about your well-being. They cared about what you could do for them.

We have all had those bitter experiences where someone was a friend, or so we thought, but then they discard us as soon as we no longer can help them. It happens in work, in clubs, and yes, even in church. People seek out other people for all kinds of reasons. It doesn't mean they are out to harm them. It just means their own interest come first and the well-being of those they seek out is secondary in importance. Deep inside of every human heart is a desire to be loved. We want to know we matter and that someone genuinely cares about us. Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd" because he cares. He's invested in us. We matter to him. The sheep know the shepherd. When they go through the gate they are assured they are looked after, cared about, and protected, as best as the shepherd can do. We know the difference between the shepherd and the thief, the users and the caring friend.

Part of the role of a person of faith is to strive to be authentic in our relationships with other. We are to model to others what it means when Jesus says, "I am the gate." We want people to see in us a person of genuine compassion and care, not a user. It means that we need to practice caring and listening. We should also be willing to forgive. Celebrating Jesus, the Good Shepherd, also means challenging ourselves to live in appropriate ways.

When those words are translated instead as "I am the Door" it would conjure up different images for Jesus' listeners. Sheep pens were not the only enclosure shepherds used. When they were out in the country they didn't have permanent structures with high walls and locking gates. In the country they used sheepfolds. There the threats were not thieves but predatory animals. These enclosures had walls, but the door was just a bare entrance. There was no gate. It was an opening in the wall. The shepherd would lie down at night in the doorway. Sheep need to feel safe and have their needs met before they will lie down and rest. What helps a sheep to lie down? The shepherd in the doorway.

This reminds us that when we are surrounded by threats we can still have peace. The shepherd's presence can calm us in the midst of a crisis. We all know this to be true. We have our own personal stories where understanding God is with us gave us a sense of calm during an emergency. We know that feeling was not possible to create on

our own. I see people handle challenging health news with grace, face the death of a beloved with peace, and move into the unknown with conviction all because of faith. Unfortunately, I have also witnessed the reverse. People who became angry and bitter because of health news, destroyed by the death of a loved one, and fearful and unwilling to move forward. They have no sense of security or God's presence. This doesn't mean a faithful person will not be knocked down by health news, or feel extreme loss at a death, or not be scared at the future, but it is not their final or lasting response. They see the shepherd and they settle and find peace.

Jesus is the good shepherd and we need to see ourselves as sheep. I know what I said at the beginning. But this image helps us to understand that God is with us in the dance between the need for security and freedom, routine and joy. We are being watched over. This is part of the good news of our faith. In God, we find that deep love and compassion that is genuine and lasting and that challenges me to be the same to others. When things get scary I am reminded that I am not fighting the battles alone but God is with me.

I am giving you a card with a piece of sheep wool on it today to remind you of your challenge to keep your eyes on the shepherd who is our gate and door protecting us in our coming in and going out.