

John 10: 1-18  
But We Are Not Sheep  
March 30, 2014  
UUMC

The late Peter Gomes, professor at Harvard Divinity School, tells this story about the time he was asked to preach on this passage from the Gospel of John about the Good Shepherd:

Many years ago I was invited by my friend, Richard Holloway, to preach on the occasion of his consecration as bishop of Edinburgh and the Episcopal Church in Scotland. By extending this invitation to me – a Baptist-- to preach at his consecration, Richard broke with all convention.

Later he was placed in the embarrassing position of having his invitation rejected by his fellow bishops in the Scottish church—because I, as a mere Baptist, did not stand in apostolic succession – the line of bishops that was traced back to the apostle Peter. Poor Richard had to do the embarrassing thing of withdrawing the invitation he had extended to me and inviting me instead to preach at the evening enthronement service rather than at the morning consecration service. He was embarrassed by this, and I was mildly perplexed and even a little bit annoyed, but not altogether surprised.

The evening service was full of great ceremony. The bishop stood at the door of his cathedral on the outside and banged on it with his crozier demanding admission. And there was I, this Baptist, surrounded by all these ancient bishops of the Episcopal Church in Scotland, still smarting, I must confess, from my exclusion in the morning.

The text that was assigned to me for the evening service was the first several verses of this text about the Good Shepherd. Not the Spirit of God, but a spirit got into me. As I read the text which you have just heard, I announced to all assembled the fact that the assigned passage had ended prematurely. The passage goes on to describe in more detail some interesting things about the shepherd and the sheep. One of the most telling verses, which was omitted from this reading, was verse 8, which says of the Good Shepherd, "All who came before me were thieves and robbers."

I said, "So much for the doctrine of apostolic succession."

The image is a familiar one to all of us – even those of us who are neither bishops nor Baptists. The picture is comforting: Jesus as the Good Shepherd who gathers his sheep and uses his very self as the gate to the sheepfold, preventing thieves and robbers from entering and doing harm. It is reassuring to think of oneself as one of Jesus' flock, known by name and protected by Jesus.

I'm guessing that *some* of you know something about sheep, but that most of us do not. My experience with sheep is limited to a few visits to 4H Barns at county fairs and a few trips to places like Greenfield Village where we watched sheep shearing and learned to watch where we were stepping. I do know that sheep are not very intelligent. It has been said that God created sheep in order to make chickens look smart.

In contrast, Jesus' listeners knew a lot about sheep. When Jesus spoke about shepherds and sheep, he was speaking to people who had everyday experiences with sheep and lambs, goats and kids. Even if they made their living some other way, they watched shepherds do their work all the time. They drank the milk of those animals, turned that milk into cheese, used their wool, and ate them for dinner. In fact, sheep were not just providers of daily nourishment, they were essential for the religious rituals of Jesus' time. Every year, in preparation for the spring Passover festival – which is coming up in April this year – they heard the call from the book of Exodus to “take a lamb for each family” and prepare it as part of the Passover meal.

Jesus' listeners knew a lot about sheep and they were used to hearing God described as their Good Shepherd. They knew the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm as we do, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and the 79<sup>th</sup> Psalm, we are “your people and the sheep of your

pasture.” In the book of the prophet Ezekiel, God declares “I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out...I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep.....” (Ezek 34:11).

It must have seemed quite strange and startling for Jesus’ friends and followers to hear Jesus tell them that *he* was the good shepherd. They knew who the good shepherd was – it was God. Were they to conclude that *Jesus* was God?

It is a bold statement -- that Jesus is God. It is in keeping with the grand vision of Jesus that we find in the Gospel of John: Jesus is the one who was before all time; he is the one through whom all things came into being; he is the very Word of God, made flesh. As we have seen this month in worship and in our Gateway study groups, this image of Jesus as the good shepherd is one of many images that John uses to express who Jesus is. He is the vine, the bread of life, the living water, the light of the world. Here he is the good shepherd, who leads his sheep out to find abundant pasture, and he is the gate that protects his flock from thieves and robbers.

Some of the earliest images of Jesus found in churches and tombs were not portrayals of Jesus on the cross or the infant Jesus in the manger, they are images of Jesus as the good shepherd. In the earliest known house church, there is a fresco (a wall mural) of the shepherd Jesus carrying a lamb upon his shoulders. He is

painted that way in the catacombs and final resting places, as well. It is a compelling image even now when so few of us know anything about sheep or shepherds: Jesus guides and protects and provides throughout all of life, at the beginning and at the end.

Our text says that the good shepherd leads his sheep through the gate and out into good pasture. But Rev. Laura Mendenhall, who grew up in farming territory, does know something about sheep. She says that much of a shepherd's leading actually comes from the back, not the front, of the flock.

In order to keep the sheep from overgrazing their pastures, she says, shepherds have to move their flocks frequently. But they can't do this by charging out in front and shouting orders to them. "Here sheep, sheep, sheep, come this way. Follow me, sheep, turn here." If they were to try to guide their sheep this way, the animals would probably just turn around and go in the opposite direction.

Instead shepherds work from behind – talking, singing, coaxing, and encouraging, giving orders to the dogs who nip at the sheep's heels to keep them going. The shepherds keep an eye on the stragglers and the wanderers, the injured and the sick; they pay special attention to the ones who are most vulnerable to being left behind and set upon by predators.

The sheep may not recognize the shepherd's face, because they rarely see it. But they do recognize the shepherd's voice, encouraging them from behind, and they trust it.

We may not know much about sheep, but we do recognize the comparison. Like the sheep, we too live in a world that is both filled with abundance and dangerous. We are often just as vulnerable as sheep, sometimes putting ourselves in the way of danger, or wandering about as though we were indestructible when, of course, we are not. We, too, can live stupidly, overusing our resources, overgrazing our pastures, without planning ahead.

We might wish Jesus would direct us from in front, giving us explicit signals. We wish he would be out in front, showing us exactly where to go and what to do...then we would have someone else to blame when things go wrong. But usually Jesus leads from behind, not shouting directions but encouraging us to use our own judgment to make the right decisions. He pays special attention to the most vulnerable – the sick, the injured, the very young and the very old, the ones left behind. He picks us up when we get into trouble. But most of the time he asks us to go ahead and trust what we know.

In this way, of course, we are *not* like sheep, who cannot be fairly expected to think for themselves. (Remember why God created chickens?) And we must keep

in mind the ultimate purpose a shepherd has for gathering sheep together and protecting them – to fatten them up for the slaughter. Sheep are kept safe in the sheepfold, they are led to green pastures and protected from wolves, because they are going to be sold and eaten.

But we are not sheep! There are limits to all analogies and metaphors and we have found this one. We are gathered and guarded not for slaughter and not to be eaten, but for love and redemption and service.

The abundant life that our Good Shepherd leads us to is one of amazing grace and endless love. We can trust our shepherd to pay attention when we are vulnerable, to care for us when we are sick or injured, to seek us out when we wander into dangerous territory. We are led to a life in which we can trust the shepherd's voice even when we do not see his face. But it is not free of risks or commitments.

Jesus knew this all too well. Because he is not only the shepherd and the gate, but also the lamb. The Passover Lamb. Please listen carefully now. Jesus is the lamb, but he is not sacrificed to pay some sort of debt, or to satisfy God's wrath that cannot be appeased in any other way. Those are all theories of "atonement" developed much later in the history of the church. Particularly in John's Gospel, Jesus is not the Lamb because he pays a penalty. Jesus is the Lamb because in his death he reveals who God is, and how unconquerable God's love is.

Following the Good Shepherd all the way to the cross means knowing, not only in our minds but in our very guts, security in the face of danger, joy that crowds out sorrow and love that overwhelms fear. It means being led along paths we would not choose for ourselves. It means being prodded by the shepherd who knows our needs better than we do.

Being one of Jesus' flock does not mean that death will not come, that tragedy will not strike, that our hearts will not be broken. It means that whatever befalls us, we may sing this psalm, too:

Even though I walk through the corridors of the ICU, I will not fear death...

Though I pass through the valleys of depression or delusion, I will not be alone...

Though people may taunt me or shun me, I will not lose heart...

Though I may sleep in doorways on cardboard boxes, I will fear no evil....

For you anoint me...guard me...love me....

Jesus is the shepherd: he leads us to lives of abundant grace. Jesus is the gate: he places himself between us and all that would destroy our faith and take away our true humanity. Jesus is the lamb: he chose to follow the path that led to death but resulted in life. He submitted himself in order to reveal God's self.

Jesus did not come with swords and war horses but on a donkey with palm branches waved in front. Others may try to lead us, others may claim to be our shepherd, but we know the voice of Jesus. We know the way that he leads. Not armed with swords, but with courage and faith, leading us to pastures of peace.

That very early fresco of Jesus as the shepherd with a lamb draped over his shoulders is in a house church in what is now Syria. It was discovered in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and dates back to the early or mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century. The fresco was painted above the baptismal font – the place where the Christian life begins. Jesus is our Good Shepherd from the very beginning of our earthly journey...and he is our shepherd at its end.

You might remember that at the close of a funeral, when we as a flock commend the one we have loved to the eternal care of God, we often say this prayer:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant.

Acknowledge, we humbly pray,

a sheep of your own fold

a lamb of your own flock

a sinner of your own redeeming.

Receive her/receive him into the arms of your mercy,

into the blessed rest of everlasting peace,

and into the glorious company of the saints in light.

Let's close by offering that prayer for ourselves, not because we are at the end, but because we know our Good Shepherd and we follow his voice from beginning all the way to the end:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend ourselves, your servants.

Acknowledge, we humbly pray:

The sheep of your own fold,

The lambs of your own flock,

The sinners of your own redeeming.

Receive us into the arms of your mercy,

into the blessed rest of everlasting peace,

And into the glorious company of the saints of light.

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