

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
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SERMON: THE SHEPHERD WHO LAYS DOWN HIS LIFE FOR THE SHEEP  
TEXT: JOHN 10: 1-11

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

*Pastoral Footnote:* I don't often start with a footnote but it seems right and proper. You see, as far as I can tell I have never preached on this exact scripture in 31 years of ministry. Oh I've preached on Jesus as the Good Shepherd more times than you can shake a stick at (And I can shake that stick at least until lunchtime.) but I've always used easier texts. Maybe that's a point in favor of using the lectionary – it calls us to preach on texts that we otherwise might avoid.

A friend of mine always told me that the Bible stories about the Good Shepherd and the sheep often is falsely translated into a local pastor trying desperately to herd cats. As interesting as that might be to preach it is not what the scriptures really mean!

Before I get going there is one thing that I have to point out. This scripture is difficult because it is at least two separate sayings of Jesus that John has put together. John is famous for doing that! In fact, my personal theory is that John wrote down on individual 3X5 cards all the stories about and sayings of Jesus, piled them up on a big table, and then began to separate them into smaller piles related by theological topics – a pile for crucifixion stories, another for resurrection stories, and another for Good Shepherd stories. Then he took all those stories and edited them together. In this case

the editing is a bit jarring. Even the scripture says the Pharisees, the people whom Jesus was talking about did not understand. So, let's see if we can unpack this scripture.

To understand this scripture there are several things you need to put together in some theological algebraic equation. (The thought of "theological algebraic equations" make my head pound!)

The first thing Jesus talks about are sheep. You realize that Jesus is talking about us, don't you? It's not the animal that I would have selected to represent us.

Did you know that when Congress was debating which animal would be our national symbol, many people pushed the American Bald Eagle but Benjamin Franklin thought that having a glorify vulture as our national symbol was awful. He proposed...the turkey - a smart, quick game bird. Can you imagine what it would be like if Benjamin Franklin had gotten his way. Engraving of turkeys would be on our money, turkeys would fly over our flag poles, and it would be illegal to hunt turkeys! Do you think we'd all serve bald eagle every Thanksgiving?

Well, Jesus chose to refer to us as "sheep." Possibly because sheep are easily led astray, have limited loyalty, have poor vision, are great grilled with mint leaves (Sorry, just wanted to see if you were still awake.), and are seldom able to survive alone because to carnivores they look like dinner.

There are parts of Dallas, even parts of Denton (if you read the police blotter in the Denton paper) that are full of predators. Sheep that go there often get shorn of their valuable!

Together all those who hear the voice of Jesus and follow become "the flock."

The leader of the sheep, the shepherd, is...Jesus. You knew that. Everyone gets a 100 on the test. Hey, I don't want to be the pastor who loses his job because his students miss a couple of questions on an exam!

Jesus is our shepherd because he has tender knowledge of each of us and calls us by name. Jesus is the one whose sole purpose is to ensure the safety of the flock. Jesus is the one who will protect the flock. The one who will guide them to food and safe water. The one who will tend to all their wounds. And when Jesus leads, it is from the front so that we follow in the paths which the shepherd walked.

The shepherd and the fish are the oldest symbols of Christ and Christians. By the fourth century the image of Jesus as shepherd was precluded by the image of Christ the Pantocrator, the Cosmic Ruler (looking remarkably like a Roman emperor), as Constantine united the church and the secular state. As the church became an expression of imperial power, the shepherd's staff was replaced with a gilded crozier and the crown of thorns by the triple tiara of the pope.

But for those people who look to the Bible for direction, the image of Jesus as Shepherd is deeply personal and powerful!

The scripture notes that there are "others," in this parable, most noticeably those who are thieves and bandits who seek to destroy the flock. They try to break in. (Just to be clear - sheep are always welcome to come in by the gate but predators have to find a way in/under/over/or through the gate!) They call the sheep to come away but the sheep will not recognize their voices and will not follow.

There are lots of wolves in shepherd's clothing calling, calling, calling to those who follow the sound of Jesus' voice. Sometimes they, too, can sound good, sweet, even desirable. And alas, some sheep do decide to run off and party with the predators. The few who come back limp in with scars and cautionary tales.

Confession time. This is not just about the lay people. I can hear voices, too. If someone who sounded just like Lauren Bacall called me on my cell phone and asked me for my SS#, birthday, Driver's License #, and home address - I just might give it - because of the voice. If she called me to jump out of the sheep pen I just might jump.

Personally, I think that a woman who sounds like Lauren Bacall and looks like Jessica Alba could rule the world for as long as it interests her. But I think it would be so easy it would get boring and she'd be off to tackle something more challenging.

There are lots of other voices which call to the sheep. Some of them are obvious: drugs, sex, money, power. Others are perhaps less obviously dangerous to Christians: unbridled partisan politics, freedom from personal responsibility, and freedom from the needs of the poor, the sick, and the aged.

These voices call us to come away from the Word of God, from the voice of the Shepherd. Remember: David Koresh. Jim Jones. Tony Alamo. Rev. Moon. There's always someone who tries to sound like The Shepherd. When in doubt one has to look

very closely at their words and compare them with what Jesus taught. There should be no difference!

At this point John introduces the second Jesus statement – in which Jesus says “I am the gate for the sheep.”

I’m guessing Jesus was not literally a gate – that this is a metaphor. Still, there is some evidence that in the Biblical era of Judean shepherds sometimes had pens with a single opening and that at night they would sleep in the opening, in effect becoming the gate. They were there to both prevent the wolves from getting in and the sheep from wandering away.

Gates work two ways: First, they keep unwanted visitors outside. Remember than when the Jehovah’s Witnesses knock on your front door and want to come in! And second, they keep the flock from scattering. It keeps them together where they can be fed and defended.

In churches we often talk about opening the front door so that visitors can come in but the real problem is that we leave the back door open so that members slip out, sometimes unnoticed. That’s the door that we ought to keep closed!

Sometimes the wolves don’t want the sheep!

I’ve seen some sorry things in my time but one of them still grates. About 20 miles from my church in Carlisle , Iowa, was the town of Knoxville. It had a nice little Disciple congregation. Had. Seems they had a sudden increase in membership. An increase more than anything they had ever know and they couldn’t explain it but it was great. It was great until one day when they came to church and found a sign posted outside that told them they were no longer members of their church. A quiet little congregational meeting, very well attended by the new members, had up and changed the constitution and bylaws and then voted out of membership all the Disciples. Apparently it was easier to steal someone else’s church than to build one. And every Sunday the Disciples had to drive past the church which they had built on the way to the school where they had to worship.

I remember an ancient story. It was about an upper level management meeting in Hell. The Devil has gathered his top lieutenants for a brain storming meeting. The Devil says, “OK, we are losing ground to these Christians. We need to come up with a new strategy. What do ya got?” One demon piped up, “Let’s up the bounty on

Christian souls." Devil replied, "It's already so high that I'd have to raise taxes again to pay for it. No new taxes! Next." A second demon volunteered, "Let's make sinning more attractive." The Devil snorted, "How much more attractive can Hollywood make sin. They are already selling it in 3-D! Next." The youngest demon present stood up and nervously said, "Christians know what we are offering is wrong. They know that no matter how attractive we make sin that it is deadly. And they know what the only way to get to Heaven is by faith in Jesus." "Yes, yes," said the Devil. "So what is your plan?" "We call to them from every direction, saying "Have faith in God, be just, avoid temptation - tomorrow! Have fun now - there's plenty of time for God later." There is now a bigger than life statue of this young demon right beside the gates to Hell - in honor of the demon who came up with the best way to attach Christian, ever.

There is only one who can stand between the sheep and the predators. Jesus. When night falls - which side of the gate do you plan to be on?