


“Shepherd”
Sunday, May 7th, 2017
4th Sunday of Easter

#3 in series of 3: *“Where Doubt Leads”*

 **John 10:1-10 (NRSV)**

Jesus the Good Shepherd

“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.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: *Affirmation of Faith*]

[MESSAGE]

Over the past two weeks, we read two stories about disciples who faced doubt.

Their doubt ultimately led them to deeper faith in Jesus.

Their deeper faith enabled them to continue to follow Jesus, even after he had left them.

Today, I want to talk about *how* their confidence was **possible**.

What allowed these doubting disciples to use their faith to settle into a life that seemed impossible?

Let us pray...Good Shepherd, teach us to follow you and to be faithful to the calling you gave us to be shepherds in your name. **Amen.**

It's interesting to note that this familiar section of John's gospel is part of a much larger narrative that begins at 9:1 and ends at 10:21; the chapter division must not obscure the fact that this story runs continuously.

It follows the same pattern that John uses in other parts of the gospel: *sign – dialogue – discourse*.

First Jesus performs a sign: he gives sight to the man born blind.

Then there is a dialogue as the Pharisees investigate the healing, question the man, and try to figure out what it means.

Finally, Jesus offers a discourse, or interpretation of the sign that he performed.

The Good Shepherd story today is Jesus' way of interpreting the healing story and the Pharisees' reaction to it.

It seems like there are a lot of instances where people misunderstand Jesus' actions and he has to explain himself.

This is particularly true of the Pharisees; they often view Jesus suspiciously.

Their distrust grows out of their fear that Jesus and his followers are a threat to their power.

It's really hard to find fault with Jesus' message of love, compassion, healing, and mercy; none of this goes against God's law.

Their control over the people *and their offerings* is diminished when the whole of Pharisaic Law is distilled into the **Two Great Commandments**:
Love God with your heart, soul, and mind;
Love your neighbor as yourself.

So, I got to thinking about what this story teaches us about our relationship with Jesus and how that might be helpful when we have questions or doubt.

Jesus begins his discourse by telling us *who he is not*.

He does not try to sneak into the sheepfold the way thieves and bandits do.

Instead, Jesus comes in through the gate where the gatekeeper welcomes him and the sheep recognize his voice.

The sheep follow him because they trust his voice; they flee from the voice of a stranger.

The gospel writer tells us that the disciples aren't catching on to Jesus' metaphor.

So, he takes it a step further and says that he is the gate as well.

Anyone who comes in through him will have abundant life.

It may seem odd to picture Jesus as both the Shepherd and the Gate.

This is just part of a complex metaphor.

The story speaks of sheep, shepherd, gate, gatekeeper, strangers, thieves, bandits, and wolves.

All of these, except for the wolves, are introduced in the first ten verses, and all of the elements of this extended metaphor contribute to understanding who Jesus is, and who we are in relation to him.

The function of the gate is to keep the sheep together in the sheepfold during the night, safe from thieves and predators.

During the day, the gate is opened so that the sheep can go out, following their shepherd, to find pasture.

The gate and the shepherd work together for the well-being of the sheep, so that the flock thrives.

Jesus is both, the gate *and* the shepherd; he guards and protects his sheep from danger, and he provides for their nourishment, their abundant life.

With this in mind, we look back at the healing story and wonder: *if the religious leaders are supposed*

to be the shepherds, why do they not care for the flock?

Instead of celebrating the miracle that the man's sight has been restored, they question him.

They see this miracle as a threat to their power and control over the flock.

Instead of protecting and nurturing this man, they refuse to believe that his healing is God's will and they expel him from the congregation.

They are more interested in preserving their institution than they are in the well-being of their flock.

In contrast, Jesus not only heals the man but, when he hears that he has been expelled, Jesus seeks him out again.

He goes to the man and invites him to join their community, his flock.

The man born blind finds salvation not only in physical healing, but also in spiritual healing – he receives spiritual sight to recognize Jesus.

He followed the voice of Jesus before he could see him, and it led to new life.

His days of isolation are over; he now knows himself to be a valued member of Jesus' flock, cared for and protected.

I want to be sure we notice this idea of isolation.

Blind all his life, the man was isolated through no fault of his own; he was born isolated.

Through Jesus, he gains his sight and leaves isolation behind him as he joins the flock.

This is important because it shows us that the image of Jesus as **The Gate** is not one of **EXCLUSION**...This is not a license for us to think of ourselves as the true followers of Jesus and others as outsiders.

The purpose of The Gate is not to keep out other sheep.

Remember what Jesus said in Verse 16: ***"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my***

voice. So, there will be one flock, one shepherd.”

The Gate is one of ***INCLUSION*** – designed to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep -- thieves, bandits, and wolves.

This is an important story for us to remember in these days of conflict within our denomination over the issue of human sexuality.

Jesus makes it clear that it is his prerogative to decide who to open The Gate for.

It is not up to us to decide who is a true follower of Christ or who is being called into ministry.

Jesus makes those calls and it is our job only to discern how Jesus asks us to nurture and care for the ones that He has called.

Jesus does not call the qualified; he qualifies those He calls.

This morning, I believe we see that our doubts are satisfied and our questions are answered when we allow ourselves to follow the Good Shepherd.

In this story, we realize that Jesus welcomes all persons into his flock.

We also see that sometimes we get in the way of including everyone that Jesus chooses to include.

We perceive threats to our institution, where we should see opportunities to care for and protect a loved child of God.

John tells us that Jesus came so that we might have abundant life that leads to life eternal.

“Life” or “eternal life” in John’s Gospel is not just about life after death.

It is about life that begins here and now; it is knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent.

It is knowing the voice of the good shepherd who truly cares for us.

It is life in community, finding security and nourishment as part of his flock.

It is life that abounds in meaning and value and endures even beyond death.

This life requires us to: *Love God with your heart, soul, and mind; Love your neighbor as yourself.*

If we, as individuals and as the United Methodist Church, truly follow the Shepherd's Voice, it might be clearer how to proceed going forward.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**