

This Gate Needs No Keeper [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
John 10:1—10; Psalm 23

Today, in this ‘Bible-Study’ kind of sermon, I’m going to invite the stories and the imagery of our sacred text to do the work of interpreting one another. We cannot get around the fact that we are always interpreting. Right now, you are interpreting me and I am interpreting you. And so, I’m guessing that not many of us have had day-to-day and night-to-night experiences with sheep. Sheep, however, are grazing, getting lost, getting found and being led to slaughter all over the Bible. And yet the original hearers of the poetry of Psalm 23 didn’t take it literally, to be referring to literal sheep. To be sure, all the Psalms, all the Prophets and all the Parables of Jesus were uttered in an agrarian situation, but also against a geo-political landscape where great Super-Powers—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome—exercised coercive dominion. No matter how many chariots or legions ran roughshod through the deserts of the Ancient Near East, however, the sheep and the shepherds, in their pastures, would have something to say about *authority* and *belonging*. And that’s what we need to talk about this morning. The Authority of the Crucified and the Belonging to the Risen Christ.

1. Study of John 10:1—10: Follow the Mixed Metaphors

- Jesus identifies as Shepherd with a known “*voice*”
- Jesus as “*The Gate*” to the Sheepfold

It’s interesting to me that, this Season of Easter includes lots of stories in which Jesus is unrecognized and unrecognizable at first glance. It happens with Mary at the tomb and it happened in last week’s encounter on the road to Emmaus. And consequently, when we come to the references to Jesus being a shepherd, whose voice is known by the sheep, and then as the gate to the sheepfold, what I’d like to emphasize here is the mix of metaphors.

The mix suggests we should look and look again. A *shepherd* and a *gate* are not the same thing. And yet, Jesus wants us to associate some characteristics of each one alongside the way his presence will show up in our lives and in the world. And so to understand the comparison, it might be helpful to explore some of the Old Testament passages from which he drawing.

2. Psalm 23 versus Parable of the Lost Sheep (in Luke 15) versus Matthew 25:31—46

- In the Psalm, images of *green pasture, still waters* and *a dark valley* transition in verse five; we go from referring to the LORD in the third person to ***“You prepare a table...”***
- ***“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”*** (Luke 15:4)
- ***“All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats...”*** (Matthew 25:32)
- The sheep = those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned...
- And yet, the people don’t recall experiencing ‘the king’ explicitly: ***“And when was it that we saw you...?”*** (25:37—39)
- Verse 40: ***“And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”***
- Verse 45: ***“... just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”***

It makes sense, doesn't it? If Jesus is a good Palestinian Jew of the first century, he would have been well-schooled in the poem, which is Psalm 23. And what’s intriguing about Psalm 23 is that we don’t stay with images of green pastures and still waters and a dark valley; as of verse five, the LORD is addressed in the second person: ***“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...”*** And what kind of sheep would be comfortable sitting at a banquet table with enemies nearby? Well, let’s make the leap. One of the things Jesus may have gleaned is how authentic Spirit-inspired-community takes risk. We’re going to have to risk the possibility that really loving one another in Christ requires blood, sweat and tears—and yes, some of those moments of forgiveness are going to mean a sleepless night or two.

Now, as confirmation of what I'm suggesting here, take notice of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, which Jesus tells in Luke, chapter 15. There are one-hundred sheep and one of them goes missing. A literal, economically-minded shepherd might have cut his losses and not put the ninety-nine at risk by leaving them in the wilderness. Jesus, however, identifies with the shepherd who *would* take the risk. And, in the parable, the shepherd ventures out and finds the lost animal, quivering by itself in the dark, and hoists it on his shoulders. Then, in a celebratory mood, he returns it to the herd. Again, community at risk. So, let's keep going.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells another parable, related to sheep and shepherds, and this one needs some serious attention. Apocalyptically-speaking, the nations of the world are being separated by some sort of king ***"like a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats,"*** and the sheep apparently are NOT necessarily those who have seen and recognized Jesus in their midst. On the contrary, they ask the king: ***"and when was it that we saw you?"*** *We were too busy feeding the hungry, providing drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned.* And the king replies, *'That was exactly when I was with you... just as you were doing those things, you will encountering me.'* So let's keep going.

If Jesus is the shepherd, whose voice is recognized by the sheep, what we can safely say is that if there's no risk to our own egos, it's not him. And the community for which we aim is not unified around the right, formulaic words, but instead around the unified mission to a suffering world. Sadly, it's also a community which *will be* separated from those who could care less. Verse 45 seems pretty clear on that: ***"when you did not do it the least of these, you didn't do it to me."***

3. Connections with John 9 context

- Suggestion that blind man's condition is a result of sin or broken relationship with God
- Jesus heals on Sabbath Day—a work in violation of the Covenant Law of Moses
- Pharisees interview parents of blind man and blind man himself
- **“*You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses...*”** (9:28)
- Blind man initially says he does not know anything about Jesus; all he knows is the extraordinary wonder that he now sees
- Jesus hears that the blind man had been **“*driven out*”**—excluded—and invites him to faith. **“*He said, ‘Lord, I believe’*”** (9:38)

And here's how all this background material may help us to interpret what's going on in John's Gospel. Just before Jesus talks about the sheepfold and himself as the gate to the sheepfold in chapter ten, verse seven, he's had this brouhaha with the Pharisees. You see, apparently, there was this blind man, hanging around the temple, and people were pontificating about why he had been born blind. They wondered if it was hereditary—the sin of his parents... Well, Jesus heals the blind man, and now that human being can see on the Sabbath, which is a amazing—except the Pharisees are having 'a hard time' because Jesus has done this work of healing in violation of the Sabbath law. Then, because they can't locate the healer himself, they go after the one who's been healed; they interrogate the parents and then the formerly blind man himself; and what they say to him in John 9:28 is really telling: **“*You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses.*”** And, you see, the blind man's taken aback; he doesn't know anything about Jesus to even be his disciple; all he knows is that once he was blind, but now he sees. And the Pharisees, in frustration, kick him out. He's now officially excommunicated; he can't go back to the temple and he can't make prayers in the temple courts. He's out... lost to the only religious people he has ever known... that is, until Jesus finds him, and invites him to belong to a different sort of community. A risky community in mission to the world. And, you see, it's a community with a different set of boundaries. What are they? Let's keep going.

4. Historical Situation of first century: Devout Jews in Jerusalem are trying to attract Jesus' followers back into their own more dominant fold, which involves strict adherence to the Law of Moses—Graceless Obedience!

Well, historically-speaking, we understand that the early followers of Jesus were Jewish, and that the biggest obstacle they faced came from their strong desire for belonging. That's ironic. We all have an strong, innate desire to belong; and we've been hurt repeatedly by occasions when we've been excluded. So think about it: the Jewish believers in Jesus, who was recently crucified for blasphemy, maintain contact with the Jewish *non-believers* in Jesus. And the non-believers in Jesus have over a thousand years of Moses and the Mosaic Tradition on their side. Who's more popular? Who appears stronger? On the other hand, it's not as if Jesus wants to negate the covenant made with Moses; he comes and goes into and out of that pasture all the time. And so it's very awkward for the new, up-start community whose members are continually shamed because they don't seem as strict as they should be. Heaven-forbid! They even heal one another on the Sabbath—which means, they want to obey the law, but do it with grace...

5. Our own experience in 21st century—Autonomy without the Awe? (Can I do whatever I want?)

So where do we go from here? My suggestion is that we become curious about our own experience in the twenty-first century; and if we're honest it's pretty clear that we no longer live in a world of *Graceless Obedience*. On the contrary, our experience is of a society where pretty much anything goes; and what we value most of all is our Autonomy. *Autonomy without the Awe*. I can do whatever I want; and you can't tell me otherwise. You won't follow anything I have to say. Except maybe, in awe and wonder, there is someone who will hold your attention:

“They will not follow a stranger... because they do not know the voice of strangers. Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again... I am the gate for the sheep.”

6. Where is Church? What are the boundaries or fence-lines? How should we think of ‘spiritual danger’ as it relates to the images of ‘thieves’ and ‘bandits’?

This gate, I’m prepared to say to anyone who will listen, doesn’t need a keeper. The gate, as an image, means protection and access. Behind the gate, I have the experience of a loving community and genuine face-to-face transformation. But what’s important is that the gate does not always remain closed. The gate opens. The gate allows for the coming and the going of God’s people into the world for which Christ Jesus died and was raised again in glory. And so, as Church, what Jesus teaches here in John 10:1—10 has profound implications for where and how we set our boundaries. In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, *“Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven”*—and that statement, I think, has bearing on who might be the real *“thieves”* and *“bandits”* that we’re being warned about. In other words, if there’s a spiritual danger in the world, the irony is that it may be coming from those who feign their faith, saying *“Lord, Lord”*—but then never take on the risk. The real danger may be coming from those who are so busying interrogating others, trying to maintain purity or loyalty, that they never bother to ask themselves a question. The real danger may be coming from those who insist on their own certainty and who brazenly rally others to be so certain that they’ll break down a fence or two to prove how powerful they are.

7. The intuitive hearing of Jesus’ Voice may mean resisting the temptation to belong to an exclusionary group who sound really certain about their beliefs and who emphasize their certainty as a reason that we should belong

- **Instead: Join the risky community who “will come in and go out and find pasture” (John 10:9)**