

THE SERMON SUPPLY



A Resource from
Region 6



Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Deacon Erin Taylor Bodenstab, Northeastern Ohio Synod

Deacon for Baptized Living

Gospel Text - John 10:1-10

John 10:1-10

[Jesus said:] ¹ "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. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

SERMON TEXT:

In the gospel according to John, Jesus is big on figurative language. I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate for the sheep. And, of course, I am the good shepherd. The church loves these images, and there are more. The body of Christ. The family of faith. The priesthood of all believers.

The challenge with all this figurative language, though, is that it only makes sense if we know which things it means, and which things it does not.

Life is like a box of chocolates, right? But it does not come wrapped in plastic. There are not little brown wrappers. There is almost always not going to be hidden caramel. In fact, life is mostly not at all like a box of chocolates. We know, however, that life is like a box of chocolates because life is unpredictable.

Maybe another simile would help: unfamiliar figurative language can be like a glitter craft in Sunday school. It makes a mess. It ends up all over the place. Sooner or later there will be questions asked.

Today's gospel raises plenty of questions. In Jesus' day, sheep were familiar. Shepherd was a common, menial occupation, and even if people didn't live with sheep, or romanticized them a bit,

they knew what they looked like. “Shepherd” and “sheepfold” were culturally relevant images in the ancient world.

And even so, nobody understood Jesus’ first illustration. “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.”¹ (etc, etc.)

Okay. There’s something good there about the sheep recognizing only the shepherd’s voice and not following others, but while I hear that *sheep* do respond differently to the person who cares for them, humans are really bad at this one. False voices speaking antisemitism, Christian nationalism, the prosperity gospel, and any number of heresies and idolatries of modern life remain depressingly popular. *Sheep* may listen just to their shepherd, but *people* will listen to anyone. There’s a lot of room for confusion in this metaphor, and we can get lost in the weeds when we try to decode it. Beware simple answers, you will get in trouble.

Remember, though, the original audience was also confused. John tells us that they, too, “did not understand”². Jesus tries again.

“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep,”³ he begins. That’s a little more to work with. We know what gates look like. We

¹ John 10:1

² John 10:6

³ John 10:7

know you can go in and out through them. Sometimes they lock. A gate can swing easily open, or remain stubbornly bolted and barred or just plain stuck.

We might also hear “gate” with echoes of “gatekeeping,” the term we use when people with power decide who gets to be in and who does not. Listen up, sheep, Jesus will only let the right people in.

And there’s trouble already because, while I only know a little about shepherding or gates for that matter, I do know some things about Jesus. We know Jesus, revealed in the whole story of the gospels, not just this one illustration.

What does Jesus do? Jesus eats with everyone, welcomes everyone, heals everyone, and only gets really angry when people set up obstacles for other people. The Jesus who healed the man born blind, listened to the woman at the well, washed his disciples’ feet, died on the cross, and literally lives again would not be a gate with heavy bars. Jesus is more like a wide open gate that offers entrance, protection, welcome, and – as gates do – always swings back open again, sending his sheep out into the world where they will find him hard at work. In the context of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, this gate leads to abundant life and ongoing service, here and now, for all, whether or not we understand the metaphor.

And, in the next verse after today's portion, Jesus continues with the most familiar of the sheep metaphors: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."⁴

To be clear, shepherds don't usually die for their sheep. It is not in the standard job description. People are worth more than sheep. But of course Jesus' sheep *are* people.

While we do not find out if the audience finally understood this metaphor, they do immediately start arguing. If they get it, they don't like it. And what does Jesus do? He goes ahead with loving and teaching, dying and rising anyway.

Maybe that's the only key we really need for all of these metaphors: Jesus lays down his life for the sheep. That's who Jesus is.

And because Jesus is the shepherd and the gate, there are no hierarchies here among the sheep. We are all called, beloved, holy, and messed up, too. This is what Lutherans mean by another figurative phrase, the "priesthood of all believers." We all have a baptismal call to serve the neighbors God gives us everywhere we live our lives. We all have a ministry, loving and serving God and our neighbors, everywhere we go. There is a place for you and work for you here.

⁴ John 10:11

So go ahead, enjoy the warm and fuzzy sheep images today... and also remember that sheep are messy and Jesus calls us into that mess. Find comfort in the psalm, and peace in the image of Jesus tending his flock... and then listen for our shepherd's voice calling us to care for people, too. Remember that Jesus is the gate, which means he gets to choose and we do not. Push the boundaries of the metaphor, dare to love and serve God and neighbor no matter your status or role, and always remember *Jesus loves us*, no figurative language required. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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