

A Sheep in the Flock

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4th Sunday of Easter

FPC Uvalde

John 10: 22-30

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The metaphor of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is one of many people's all time favorite description of Jesus. There is something very comforting and nurturing about that description of him, isn't there? Who wouldn't want to be a sheep in God's flock as we read about in the 23rd Psalm today? We wouldn't want for anything.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus once again refers to himself as the shepherd. Jesus is at another festival, and the Jews have gathered around him. "When John speaks of 'the Jews' it refers not to the Jewish people as a whole, but to the synagogue and religious authorities of a particular time and place; or sometimes to Jewish believers whose faith, or their courage in expressing it, fell short in John's view."¹

These Jews wanted Jesus to come on out with it. Don't keep us in suspense any longer. Are you the Messiah or aren't you? Just tell us plainly. Well, there seems to be a problem with that. If you haven't realized yet, God is not very plain—far from it. If you ever hear anyone say they know all about and have certainty about God and all that God is, then that person most likely is not talking about God. We can have unequivocal certainty of things our minds can grasp, but who can totally grasp all the nuances of God? None of us.

Jesus told his inquirers that he had already told them plainly, but since they weren't his sheep, they didn't believe. –Oh great! That's real plain, isn't it?

The way Jesus had "told" them was not in his words, you see, it was through his works, his actions in his life. To know Jesus is to experience Jesus.

You see, the Jews were not really understanding the roles here of the sheep and the shepherd. Between those two, the shepherd is the one in charge, the leader, right? These religious authorities believed *they* were in charge—as in "tell us plainly,"—do it our way. Those that hold on to power can't ever be sheep, because the sheep are not the leaders, not in control--the shepherd is the leader.

But that is the choice Jesus puts before us: be sheep, not shepherds; let God and me (Jesus) be the shepherd. What about us? Surely we are his sheep aren't we? We come to worship every Sunday, we take communion and give our offerings. We're baptized and say our affirmation of faith each

¹ *The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV*, "Introduction to the Gospel of John, page 2012.

week. Surely Jesus is calling us his sheep, right? Do our actions speak plainly, telling others we are sheep?

Or are there some here today that may feel like an imposter? Are there some here today that are pretty sure you believe, but always seem to be at a loss for words when you are asked to tell someone else what you believe.

At the end of the day, you go to the watering hole with all the other flocks—and there are so many of them—and you listen for your shepherd's voice, but a lot of days you just really have a hard time recognizing it. You never really hear loud and clear *your* shepherd's voice and you begin to ask yourself, "What *do* I believe?"

"You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep," Jesus said. Ouch! That stings! But I wonder who is it that really keeps us out of Jesus' flock? Who convinces us that we don't believe or don't believe enough, or don't believe the right thing to be in God's flock? I would guess those are the things we tell ourselves, not something we hear from God.

Most of us have pretty strong beliefs about our beliefs. Many believe that to be part of the flock, we *should* be able to articulate exactly what we believe and why. THAT is hard, folks! There are also those that believe to be part of the flock we should be in such close contact with God all the time that we know what God wants us to do, and we surely never doubt God. Also hard.

There are others that believe that when you come to worship here on Sundays you will be so lifted into the presence of God that you will be filled all week and be able to share that with others—that you have this experience weekly and that you never get bored in worship or your mind never wanders during my sermons. As much as I would love that, folks, that just doesn't always happen.

Have I hit yet on what sometimes makes you question whether you are *really* part of the flock? Maybe you don't pray enough, maybe there are Sunday mornings when you would just rather sleep in than come to church, and you do. Maybe you don't tell others about Jesus Christ as much as you should.

Whatever it is that you are holding over your own head and whatever it is that is keeping you from believing you are a part of the flock, please stop. See if you cannot allow yourself to belong to the flock *simply because God says you do*.

Look very carefully at what Jesus is saying about being part of the flock and believing. Look in your Bibles with me at verse 26—it's on page 104. *But you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep*. He doesn't say that being part of the flock has anything to do with our *ability* to believe. Actually, he is saying quite the opposite. He is saying that we believe because we **are** his sheep. And there is every reason to believe **we**

are a part of his flock, if nothing else, than by our mere presence here today.²

So, be gentle with yourself if you can't hear your shepherd's voice everyday. It may sound different every day, and you will have your doubts. So what is it we see and hear when we hear Jesus? Sometimes we may hear the voice of security and salvation. Other days we may hear judgment or instruction to change. Learning to recognize the voice of the shepherd takes a lifetime. So be gentle.

And be gentle with yourself, too, because of Jesus' next words: *I know them* (that means you, "my wooly friends"³). *I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.* What a beautiful image. Being held in the palm of Jesus. Jesus is not saying we will never be sad or experience pain or loss or tragedy in our lives, but he is saying that he will always be there with us. We will be eternally held in the palm of his hands no matter where life leads us.

"Just as Easter is the proof that Jesus is in the palm of God, not in the hands of the emperor or even death, we, too, in our celebration here today, can claim we are in Jesus' hands and not in the hands of other powers."⁴

And all this is possible, because of Jesus' last statement: *The Father and I are one.* I would say this is a pretty plain statement of who Jesus is.

We may not be able to explain God plainly; our belief is less like certainty and more like trust or hope. The truth is, "we belong to God not because we are certain of God, but because God is certain of us."⁵

There will always be more in God's flock than we can imagine. There are some in the flock that may surprise us, and we probably surprise others by being a sheep in the fold. "But that is part of the mystery of God and God's grace. It is not something we earn or take or can work for. It is something that God simply gives, and how strange it would be for God to give it to some and not to all?"⁶ What an awesome God we love and serve that is big enough to take on the entire weight of a broken and hurting world and include them in the flock?

As we leave this hour of worship today and return into the world as sheep of the flock, may our actions tell others who we are. May each of us sense our presence in the palm of Jesus' hand. Take your worth not from your achievements, but from the depth of God's giving, from the depth

² Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life* (Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1993) 140-145.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Joseph A. Bessler. *Feasting on the Word: Fourth Sunday of Easter*. "Theological Perspective." Page 448.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Luke Bouman. Sermon on John 10: 22-30. Gottinger Predigten im Internet hg. Von U. Nembach, J. Neukirch, C. Dindel, I Karle.

God's love for you—then you will surely be in the flock of the Good Shepherd.

Let us pray: Almighty and loving God, we bless you for the gift of your Word. We pray now for the grace to believe what we have heard, and to live in ways that honor you above all. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen.