

John 10:1-10

Jesus loved to tell stories. In his preaching and teaching, a man traveling on the road became the focal point in a lesson on being a good neighbor. A wayward son welcomed home by his father taught a lesson about God's love and forgiveness.

Over and over, Jesus used vivid images to express his own identity: I am the light of the world. I am the true vine. I am the Bread of Life.

In our scripture reading for today, Jesus told another story to communicate his identity and mission. **Shepherds and sheep would have been common sights in his ancient rural setting.**

His listeners would have understood how sheep would be gathered into a sheepfold for safety overnight. **The gate would be closed with the shepherd stationed at the entrance.** A thief might possibly try to climb over the fence, but if the sheep were disturbed, they would only mill about and try to get away from the stranger. Only the shepherd could open and close the gate, and when he called the sheep, **they would respond to his familiar voice and follow him.**

Our text calls this story a "figure of speech," a proverb or parable with a symbolic meaning. **In this case, the parable speaks of Jesus as both shepherd and gatekeeper, and his followers as the sheep that belong to him. Jesus makes this clear just after our reading, where he says, "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).**

Jesus also said, **"I am the gate"**; in fact he says it twice (verses 7, 9). **To our twenty-first-century ears, it may seem confusing for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd, the gatekeeper, and the gate all at the same time.**

But his manner of speaking is similar when he later talked with his disciples about **"the way" he is going, and then says, "I am the way"** (John 14:4, 6).

**It's as if no one image is enough to describe who Jesus is: light, water, bread, vine, shepherd, gatekeeper, gate, way, and more. Each image conveys part of who Jesus is - who God is - and no one image is enough.**

**These ten verses from the gospel of John are part of that wonderful collage. They form a beautifully rich parable of God as the shepherd who cares for the sheep night and day, who keeps them safe like the gate of the sheepfold, and protects them from anyone who might try to harm them or steal them away.**

Jesus' disciples and all of us are the sheep who belong to him, who gather together, who listen for his voice. As a parable of our relationship with God, this word picture paints a warm and tender portrait.

In the context of the gospel of John, this parable also functions as Jesus' commentary on his healing of a man who had been blind from birth. The first 10 verses of chapter 10 actually in essence should have been the conclusion to Chapter 9 and his healing of the blind man blind since birth. At the end of chapter nine, Jesus was still speaking with the man who was now able to see. **"I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind,"** says Jesus (John 9:39). Some of the Pharisees protested, for Jesus' words seemed to be aimed at them, and their conversation then continued into chapter ten with Jesus' response.

These first 10 verses are a continuation of the Pharisees' dispute with Jesus.

They had already questioned the man who had miraculously received his sight.

They had questioned his parents to confirm that their son had actually been born blind. Then they questioned the man again, and when they were not satisfied with his answers, they put him out of the synagogue.

In the course of their investigation, the Pharisees seemed bent on discrediting Jesus. Some bluntly said, **"This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath"** (John 9:16). Some said, **"We know that this man is a sinner"** (John 9:24). Others added to the confusion and insisted, **"We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."** (John 9:29).

As a master storyteller, Jesus answered their concerns with this story. No, he was not some unknown stranger - **he was the shepherd and gatekeeper for the sheep. Just as a shepherd would look after the welfare of his sheep, Jesus had looked after the welfare of the man who had been born blind. Instead of leaving him as a beggar at the side of the road, Jesus had given him the gift of sight both physically and**

spiritually. The man received his physical eyesight once he had washed in the pool of Siloam, and then his spiritual sight developed as he came to know Jesus as healer, prophet, and finally as Lord.

No, Jesus was not a sinner. He was the Good Shepherd. Like the shepherd of Psalm 23, Jesus provided for the needs of his sheep, in this case by restoring the sight of the man who had been born blind. Jesus blessed him with goodness and mercy, and the man blessed Jesus by his worship.

Jesus' portrayal of himself as the Good Shepherd also had an edge to it.

In the prophetic writings of the Jewish people, the leaders were often referred to as shepherds, and often in unflattering terms. So the prophet Jeremiah said, **“For the shepherds are stupid, and do not inquire of the Lord; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered”** (Jeremiah 10:21).

The prophet Ezekiel described the leaders of the people as shepherds more concerned with feeding themselves than feeding their sheep. This prophetic background would have been familiar to the Pharisees, and as leaders of the people, they must have felt Jesus' words directed at them. **If Jesus was the good shepherd, did he mean then to cast the Pharisees as the stupid shepherds? Did he mean to proclaim judgment on them?** After all, Jesus had healed the man of his blindness, and they had put the man out of the synagogue. At the end of their encounter with Jesus, some of the Pharisees were still divided between dismissing his words and being convicted by them (John 10:19-21).

Today Jesus' words present a challenge and invitation to all of us. To all of us as leaders - as parents, as church members, in our work life, wherever we exercise influence, wherever our actions impact other people - **are we good shepherds or bandits?**

**In other words, do we seek the health and well-being of those placed in our care, or do we do harm by ignoring them? Are we wise shepherds who seek God's will and way, or are we stupid shepherds who act in our own self-interest?** To all of us as sheep, Jesus invites us to enter by the gate and find abundant life. Do we hear and recognize his voice? Will we listen? The good shepherd is calling.