

Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist

John 10:1-10

“I assure you that whoever doesn’t enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger but will run away because they don’t know the stranger’s voice.” Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn’t understand what he was saying.

So Jesus spoke again, “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.”

1. Sheep

Earlier this month in some parks, farms, and yards of the UK, British sheep have been experiencing a new sense of freedom. Even as parks and open spaces are shut down due to the coronavirus, and people are secluded in their homes, sheep have taken to roaming about the newly open spaces. Rather than wandering aimlessly through the fields, it seems, sheep have been seeking out children’s playgrounds, and have begun to play! It

appears, their favorite activity is to take turns riding the “roundabout!”

In playing on a roundabout, a group of children typically sits on the base, while others spin the wheel. After a while, others get to sit on the base, while still others do the spinning. It appears, sheep are smarter than we thought! In a 40-acre farm park near Monmouthshire, a flock of sheep were spotted pushing each other on the play area roundabout two days in a row. After that, other sheep too were seen playing on a playground roundabout in Preston, and still more in Debbie Ellis’s yard. I don’t know about you, but for me, this certainly redefines for me what it means to be a “sheep!”

This week’s Gospel is about sheep! God’s people are referred to as sheep. In the past, sheep were referred to as rather unintelligent animals that wander aimlessly away if the shepherd is not there to guide them. It seems, given the opportunity, sheep would rather play organized games than simply wander aimlessly through the fields. They apparently have a sense of community, a passion for assisting each other, and definitely a zeal for fun.

Open up the gate, and sheep will find a new way to play!

Should we be surprised? The human spirit too has a natural inclination for making the best of new situations and predicaments, for making fun out of fumes. All you have to do is look at the television and the internet right now to see the

amazing creativity and innovation sparked by our coronavirus seclusion. We simply will not be held down. We will always find a “roundabout” way to do anything we desire to. Human beings, though we can be fearful at times, are also the most adaptable creatures on the planet.

2. **Metaphors**

Jesus lived in an agrarian society. Most people lived off the land—tending crops, orchards, sheep, goats, and chickens. In Judea, where Jesus did some of His teaching and preaching in and around Jerusalem, the land was rocky and rough, not particularly suitable for crops. Sheep could be raised on such land if shepherds were willing to live nomadically and to take great care that their sheep didn’t wander into danger.

In such a setting, it’s no surprise that when Jesus wanted to explain a complicated theological idea, He used agrarian language, specifically metaphors about sheep and goats and sometimes fig trees.

If, by contrast, His task was to make sense while speaking in person to 21st century Americans, He would no doubt ditch the sheep language and talk instead about high-tech stuff. Instead of telling us that He’s the gate for the sheep, He might say, “I am the portal!” or “I am the home page!” or “I am the universal remote control”—though, given our addiction to technology, He still might be tempted to add “for the sheep.”

3. Leadership

We all want good leadership—good shepherds to lead us in and out of green pasture. We vote hoping to elect it, we apply for jobs hoping to work for it, and we go to school hoping to be educated by it. We do not always find it. The trust we place in our leaders can be broken. So what are we to do?

In our Gospel reading Jesus gives us a wonderful, vivid portrait of a shepherd caring for his sheep. The shepherd would lead his sheep out to distant areas and stay there for days. Being a good shepherd, he created a temporary corral, a pen to keep the sheep in when they were not grazing. Using the crude stones of the field a shepherd could quickly put together such a structure and at night he would lay his body down in the opening of this corral making himself the door. No sheep could wander away at night unless it stepped over the sleeping shepherd and no wolf could come in to do harm without waking the shepherd. He is the gate.

Do you see what is happening here? More than any other duty the goal of the shepherd is to protect the sheep. This is how you know a good shepherd from a bad shepherd. Does the shepherd...does the leader have the best interest of his people at heart? How do you know that he or she is a good shepherd? You know by looking at the sheep.

4. Effective Leadership

Once there was an ecumenical crusade that was being held in a large city. Every imaginable denomination was in attendance for this unprecedented event. One afternoon the gathering was in session when all of a sudden a secretary rushed in shouting, "The building's on fire! The building's on fire!" Confusion reigned as each church group came together and did what came natural.

The Methodists gathered in a corner to pray. The Baptists cried, "Where's the water?" The Quakers quietly praised God for the blessings that fire brings. The Lutherans posted a notice on the door declaring that the fire was evil. The Roman Catholics passed a plate to cover the damages. The Unitarians reasoned that the fire would burn itself out if just given the chance. The Congregationalists shouted, "Every man for himself." The Fundamentalists proclaimed, "It's the vengeance of God." The Episcopalians formed a procession and marched out. The Christian Scientists concluded that there was no real fire. The Presbyterians appointed a chairperson to appoint a committee to look into the matter and make a written report.

The church secretary grabbed a fire extinguisher and put the fire out.

5. Free Will

Today's society presents us with many choices and possibilities that only seem to grow more numerous with time and the "advance" of culture. They say that "variety is the spice of life" and it might be true. Yet, the many choices that stand before us can be confusing. We need to learn how to wisely use the gift of free will, our ability to choose. This gift, if used constructively, can provide much good for our world, but if abused it can create untold grief.

Wisdom dictates that in order to use our gift of free will wisely, we must ask ourselves some important questions concerning how well we follow Jesus, the shepherd and gatekeeper, in the decisions we make. What are the criteria that we use to make the important decisions of our lives? Do we seek out family and friends, colleagues and associates? What place does God have in our decision making process? What responsibility do we feel for those God has entrusted to us? Young people, students, or subordinates at work all look to elders and superiors to lead them. By following our lead will people find the pasture of life, or are we leading people astray by the conduct of our lives? What choices have we made lately? Were they helpful and did they aid us along the path of life or were they destructive? If they were harmful, did we have the courage to change and make a better choice? When we make decisions are they based solely on our needs and wants or do we consider the desires of others?

If we find ourselves in positions of authority, do we make choices that are beneficial to all or are we selfish in our choices?

Jesus' life demonstrates that suffering is part of the Christian life. Are we willing to make the decision that may cause suffering because it is the right choice, or do we shy away because we are afraid to endure a crisis for the sake of Christ's name?

6. **The Stranger**

There was a leader in a congregation. At one time or another, he had filled most (if not all) of the important leadership positions in that church. More than that, however, oftentimes he was the one who would volunteer for those tough, dirty jobs that no one else wanted: washing dishes after a potluck supper, helping to teach the confirmation class, stacking shelves at the food bank.

This is the kind of person you would like to clone and with whom you'd like to fill the congregation, right? Not necessarily! This person was a delight to have around until things didn't go his way, and then he was a nightmare: disruptive, divisive, even destructive. He didn't understand the meaning of community, and was not a team player. When (not for the first time) he and his wife climbed into their huff-mobile and drove away after some disagreement, the congregation finally had the good sense not to beg them to come back. Finally, that congregation had learned to distinguish between the voice of a shepherd and the voice of a stranger.