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John 10:1-21

Thirtieth Message

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THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Occasionally we have pointed out how the gospel of John is constructed. Most of the first half of the book is directed towards Israel and the nation's religious authorities as John redefines Jewish history and worship in the person of Jesus:

- Chapter 2 Passover—cleansing of the Temple
- Chapter 5 Sabbath—healing of paralytic
- Chapter 6 Passover—bread of life
- Chapters 7, 8 Feast of Tabernacles—living water and light of the world
- Chapter 9 Sabbath—healing of the blind man
- Chapter 10:22 Feast of Dedication

It is significant that John, unlike the Synoptic writers, places the account of the temple cleansing early in his gospel. It seems that John does this deliberately, even if there were two cleansings. He starts at the center, at the heart of Jewish worship, and works outwards. Jesus declares he is the new temple, the new locus of worship and revelation, and that all the Jewish feasts are redefined in him. Looking at the big picture, one gets a sense of just how hard it is for the Jews to believe in Christ. Gentiles don't feel the full force of the argument. But we can read John's gospel as though it is directed to the organized church, its leadership, and its relationship with Jesus. Certainly that is the focus as we come now to chapter 10, where Jesus delivers a searing word to Israel's shepherds.

In between the Feast of Tabernacles (chapters 7 and 8), and the Feast of Dedication (beginning in 10:22), there comes the healing of a blind man, in chapter 9, followed by Jesus' discourse on good and bad shepherds, in chapter 10. The connection between chapter 10 and chapter 9 is clear when we read verses 19-21:

A division [schism] occurred again [for the third time] among the Jews because of these words. Many of them were saying, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" Others were saying, "These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?" (John 10:19-21 NASB)

The structure of the first 21 verses of this chapter is as follows:

- 1-6 Jesus gives a parable contrasting true and false shepherds
- 7-10 Jesus is the door who gives life
- 11-18 Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life
- 19-21 Division

"Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter by the door into the fold of the sheep, but climbs up some other way,

he is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is a shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he puts forth all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. A stranger they simply will not follow, but will flee from him, because they do not know the voice of strangers." This figure of speech Jesus spoke to them, but they did not understand what those things were which He had been saying to them. (10:1-6)

Jesus introduces a metaphor based on first century sheep farming practices. A couple of years ago, a young man from Wales, Joel, visited with us here at PBCC. His family are sheep farmers, so I asked him to set down his thoughts about sheep. Here is what he wrote:

Real sheep are nothing like the cute, white fluffy animals you so often see in Christian bookshops. In fact the only thing they have in common is the name. Real sheep are dirty and greasy and their wool has all sorts of bits in it. Real sheep need everything done for them. Firstly, when they're born they are vulnerable to birds pecking their eyes out. Also they need to have their tails cut off, otherwise excrement gets all over the tails and they get infections. Obviously they need to be shorn on a yearly basis. They will often put their heads through the square fence holes or alternatively in some brambles and get stuck and need help to get out again. They are also prone to other diseases: foot rot—which must be treated, maggots—which again they can do nothing about and must be treated. They also have to have their toenails cut regularly. And, as if that's not enough, they run away when you come to help (or hobble away if they have feet problems). The ewes occasionally also require help when lambing, and if the mother dies, the lamb must be bottle-fed in order to survive.

In Jesus' parable the sheep are housed in a sheep pen, possibly a family courtyard, but in this case probably a larger, independent enclosure where several families kept their sheep. An under-shepherd or doorkeeper guarded the gate.

Here Jesus describes the characteristics of a true shepherd. This one enters the sheep pen by the door. The doorkeeper allows the shepherd to enter because he knows him. The sheep hear the shepherd's voice and respond to him. There are many sheep in the fold belonging to different shepherds, but only the ones which hear the shepherd's voice will go out. This phenomenon is well attested. Several shepherds will stand outside the pen and call their sheep, and the sheep will go to their own shepherd. My friend Joel told me: "Every so often we get a 'molly lamb' (an orphan), and my little sisters bottle feed them several times a day

for 6 months or so. When they go out into the field they come whenever my sisters call them; in fact they run to my sisters when they go to the field.” The last characteristic of a true shepherd is that he does not drive the sheep but leads them.

A false shepherd does not enter through the gate because the doorkeeper doesn't know him and will not allow him access. In reality, the false shepherd is a thief and a robber. The sheep will not follow him because he is a stranger, and they do not know his voice.

The imagery contrasts good and bad, true and false shepherds. Jesus is saying that he came to the sheep pen of Judaism in the proper way. He is the good shepherd who seeks out those who are his. He calls his own sheep, meaning that they were “his” before he called them. The doorkeeper “knows” him, perhaps a reference to the Father who gave him the sheep. The shepherd metaphor was often applied to the king of Israel. David was a good shepherd in contrast to Saul (Ps 78:70-72). Jesus is making the claim that he is the true king.

The Jewish authorities, the supposed shepherds, are actually thieves and robbers. The illustration at hand is the blind man of chapter 9. Jesus called him and the man heard his voice. Then Israel's shepherds threw him out of the synagogue. They wanted to use the sheep for their own gain, putting their own security first. They are unjust leaders and have failed as shepherds. The doorkeeper does not know them and the sheep do not follow them. The word “robber” indicates an insurrectionist or rebel, a term used to describe the two men crucified with Jesus. Jesus is speaking not just of the religious authorities but also the many false messiahs who appeared in Israel prior to his appearing, and those of his own day.

This metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep is found throughout the Old Testament, particularly in Ezekiel 34. Frequently it is used in a positive way:

**The LORD is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside quiet waters.
He restores my soul;
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
For His name's sake.** (Ps 23:1-3)

**Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.** (Isa 40:11)

**“Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David,
and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd.”** (Ezek 34:23)

But oftentimes the prophets used the metaphor in a negative way to speak against the spiritual leadership of Israel:

“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophecy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?”’” (Ezek 34:2)

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. (Jer 23:1)

**“Wail, you shepherds, and cry;
And wallow in ashes, you masters of the flock;
For the days of your slaughter and your dispersions have come,
And you will fall like a choice vessel.”** (Jer 25:34)

The people listening to Jesus were aware of these passages in the OT, yet they did not understand what he was saying. He was calling out to them but they did not recognize his voice, because they were not his sheep.

So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (10:7-10)

In verses 7-18 and 26-30, Jesus expands on the abstract sheep/shepherd metaphor of verses 1-5. We run into problems if we try to make this a single cohesive parable. There are just too many variables. Jesus is both the door and the shepherd; there are hired hands, sheep from other pens, and the death of the shepherd. The problem is alleviated when we recognize that the expansions in these verses are not predicated on a single parable, but are further metaphorical uses of the three dominant features of the shepherding language introduced in verses 1-5: the gate (7-10), the shepherd (11-18), his own sheep (26-30).

In verses 7-10, Jesus proclaims himself to be the door or gate of the sheep. He states this twice, in fact, in verses 7 and 9. This is the third of seven “I am” statements in this gospel, the first two being the bread of life and the Light of the world.

In verses 1-5, Jesus is the shepherd but here he is the gate. The watchman who presided over several flocks in the pen has disappeared and the only flock in the enclosure belongs to the shepherd who serves as the gate. Again this is standard imagery, since at times the shepherd slept in the gateway to the sheepfold to protect the flock from predators.

The contrast is between the gate (perhaps the shepherd) and the thieves and robbers who come with selfish motives and brutal tactics to ravage the flock. Their goal is to steal and kill and destroy. Clearly Jesus is referring to messianic pretenders who promise freedom but lead the people into war, suffering and slavery. Jesus came not to ravage the flock but to give abundant life to it. He offers a freedom not achieved by a sword but by a cross, a freedom not from Rome but from sin. Jesus is the entrance into a life of security and plenty. His sheep are fat, contented and flourishing. This is life at its scarcely imagined best.

A door is the way of access from one place to another, one world to another. Jesus is the only way of entrance into life. Here the idea is not that Jesus as a shepherd draws out his own flock from a rather mixed fold, but that he as the gate is the sole means by which the sheep may enter the safety of the fold or the luxurious forage of the pasture. There is only one means of receiving eternal life, only one source of knowledge of God, only one fount

of spiritual nourishment, only one basis for spiritual security. Jesus is the door.

**Open to me the gates of righteousness;
I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD.
This is the gate of the LORD;
The righteous will enter through it.
I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me,
And You have become my salvation. (Ps 118:19-21)**

Jesus goes on to expand on the metaphor in a different manner:

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. He flees because he is a hired hand and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.” (10:11-18)

Not only is Jesus the door, he is the good shepherd (verses 11 and 14). The Greek word for “good” does not indicate moral goodness, rather it implies beautiful, noble or worthy. The sheer attractiveness of Jesus draws people. They want to come to him.

Shepherding is frequently regarded as a lightweight occupation, one fit only for a sissy. In reality, it is a tiring, manly and sometimes dangerous job. Quoting my friend Joel again: “I try to avoid as much of the work as possible. It’s hard, dirty work and it’s certainly not fun. When helping the sheep my dad sometimes has to wrestle them and he has ended up under a sheep before. Being a shepherd (at least in England) means going out in the freezing cold to check on them and staying out there if they need help. It means getting up at all hours during lambing season to help the ewes. As a shepherd, you’ve really gotta love your sheep, it requires some serious dedication.”

The hired hand has no attachment to the sheep. Thieves and robbers are wicked but hired laborers are not; they are simply more committed to their own well being than that of the sheep. In the face of danger the hired hand will not risk injury to himself. The sheep are not his, and since sheep are not an expensive commodity, he saves his own skin and leaves the flock defenseless.

In contrast, Jesus is the good shepherd because he willingly gives his life for the sheep. He is ready to risk his life, like David did when a bear or a lion attacked the flock (1 Sam 17:34-36). A shepherd would not risk his life because his death would leave the flock exposed. Jesus does not merely risk his life, he lays it down according to the Father’s will. Jesus’ death is what qualifies him to be the good shepherd. His death does not expose the flock, but

by means of it he draws the sheep to himself (Heb 13:20). The shepherd does not die merely as an example to the flock which is in mortal danger, but in order to save them.

Jesus tells the Jews that there are other sheep that he will call to himself which will become part of the flock (a reference to the Gentiles). Jesus’ hour will come in chapter 12, when certain Greeks tell Philip that they want to see Jesus (12:20). There will be one flock with one shepherd. This too is the promise of Ezekiel 34. In 10:1-5, the sheep pen represents Judaism. Jesus calls his own sheep out of that fold and the sheep that remain in that pen presumably are the unbelieving Jews. He then calls to the nations and brings in people who previously did not fit in the flock of Judaism.

Jesus’ words reveal a reciprocal relationship with the sheep that is like his relationship with the Father. The sheep and the shepherd know each other. This is likened to the mutual knowledge that exists between the Father and the Son.

Jesus words also highlight the Father/Son relationship. The love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father existed prior to the love of God for the world. It is this love that makes salvation possible. The Father loves the Son because he lays down his life. But Jesus laid down his life in order to receive it again: He died with the resurrection in view. And he gave his life willingly. The crucifixion was not the result of circumstances. Jesus was not subordinate to the Jews. While he gave up his life, he had the authority to not do so. No part of the cross took place outside of God’s plan. The Father commands, the Son obeys.

Following these words of Jesus, the crowd’s response is divided:

A division occurred again among the Jews because of these words. Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?” Others were saying, “These are not the sayings of one demon-possessed. A demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?” (10:19-21)

The coming of the shepherd and the light causes division. The “Jews” (verse 19) probably is a reference to the crowds at large, leaders and lay alike. Some say Jesus is demon-possessed; others say that a demon could not possibly heal a blind man. Proclaiming Jesus will always cause division. Some will hear the voice of the shepherd and join the flock; others will resist and stay put.

There is much in this text to draw from, but let me say three things by way of application.

Jesus is our shepherd, and we are the sheep of one flock.

Isn’t this what we all want? A shepherd to care for us and love us, to give us rest and security, to nurture and feed us.

**Know that the LORD Himself is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. (Ps 100:3)**

The fact that we all are sheep means that we probably are a lot more trouble to God than we think. We picture ourselves as the white, cute and cuddly creatures that everyone loves. The reality is that we are dirty, grimy, sickly and totally dependent on the shepherd. We get ourselves in all kind of predicaments and dilemmas, and yet we run away when he tries to help us.

The fact that Jesus is our shepherd means that he is very patient. He puts up with a lot from us. He is committed to us because he is not a hired hand. We are his sheep. He nurtures and cares for us because he is not a thief or robber. He protects us because he is willing to give up his life. He knows us and we recognize his voice. He provides everything we need and is willing to do everything for us. If there is one sheep which gets lost he leaves the rest of the flock to save the one. Maybe you are lost this morning and you recognize his voice and want to come to him.

The fact that there is one flock means that God is calling sheep from all nations, races and backgrounds. God has other sheep. They are smelly and dirty and they might appear to be different or undesirable. The flock won't be nice and tidy and neat and always to our liking. We need to keep in mind that this is God's flock, not ours. God knows each sheep by name and loves each one the same. The best thing we can do is keep our eyes on the Shepherd, that we follow him encourage others to do the same.

True shepherding in the church today is about self-giving leadership.

There is only one Chief Shepherd. He is the only door to the flock, the only one who came in the proper way. But just as there were many under-shepherds in Israel, so there are many under-shepherds in the church who are servants of the Chief Shepherd. In any church body there are many shepherds, not just one or two.

Jesus sets the pattern for how under-shepherds should function. Church leadership is not about finding fulfillment or exalting ourselves over others. It is not a vehicle for selfish gain or a means for feeling good about who we are. It is not a way to gain applause or stature. There is no strict hierarchical organizational chart that defines power and change of command.

Church leadership entails sacrifice and laying down of our lives. Leaders serve willingly, guarding the flock from wolves, false teachers and false messiahs. They lead the flock to good pasture and make sure they are well fed. They don't drive the sheep by barking orders, but rather lead them through relationship. They know the flock and the flock knows them. Since church leaders are under-shepherds they don't control the flock or assume the role of Chief Shepherd. The church is in serious trouble when any leader thinks he or she is the Chief Shepherd or when the local body depends on just one or two leaders. Under-shepherds may be leaders but they are smelly sheep just like everyone else, having feet of clay. They too have to depend on the Chief Shepherd and trust him for the sheep. The mark of the true leader is the cross. Paul's qualification as an apostle and minister of the gospel was that he bore the marks of the cross in his own life (1 Cor 4:1-2; 2 Cor 11:12-15; Acts 20:28-31; 1 Pet 5:1-3).

Corrupt leaders and false shepherds have given God and the church a bad name throughout history. This happened in Israel's past and it is being repeated in the church. We should never condone bad shepherding, but neither should we be surprised by it.

Most of us are shepherds in some capacity, and we can apply the characteristics of being a true and good shepherd.

We will have numerous opportunities to model the kind of shepherding that Jesus patterned. The body is made up of mothers, fathers, husbands, bosses, teachers and coaches. Because Jesus is our shepherd we can become shepherds to others.

The business world is characterized by the money-grabbing, selfish interest of CEO's and executives. People don't care about the workers or the local community; they care only for themselves and showing a profit in the quarterly report. Every day we read of scandals with the SEC, lawsuits between companies, mergers and acquisitions. Our workplaces provide an opportunity to shepherd people. What kind of a leader will you be in your place of business? How can you help shepherd people even if you are not a manager or a boss? Will you lead people or drive them?

There is not a better term than shepherd for a husband or a parent. A husband is a shepherd to his wife. At times he will lay down his life to be like Christ to her. This is what God calls us to do as husbands. Fathers are shepherds to their families; they set the tone for the entire house. Parents shepherd their children, who are like sheep. They get into trouble and become sick. They can't do things on their own. They run away when you are trying to help them. They hurt you either intentionally or unintentionally. Parenting calls for great patience and understanding, great commitment and dedication. Parents stay up all night with a sick child or wait by the door until they come home. You may not see results in the short-term, but a hired hand will not care for your children like you will because they are not his.

In the world of sports today coaches feed on their players, using them to advance their careers. Their only concern is about wins and losses, and they will do whatever it takes to get a win. But there are examples of coaches who care more about the person rather than his or her contribution to the team. Coaches who shepherd their team are more concerned with character, attitude and integrity. They are willing to sacrifice a win to do the right thing. Many of you parents are on the sidelines every week. What a wonderful opportunity to shepherd children in your community.

Think about the places where God has put you to shepherd. Jesus set the pattern for us to lay down our life. When we do that he gives it back to us again in eternal life, resurrection life.

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