

"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ² The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. ³ The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷ Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:1-10)

How Does Jesus Take Care of his Sheep?

The Bible talks a lot about sheep. Old Testament, New Testament, it doesn't matter. They're everywhere. Why was that? Because the Jewish people knew all about sheep. They ate them. They sheared them. Even city folk like us often grew up with them. So it was easy for Jesus to talk about shepherds and sheep to them. But not so much to us. Most of the time when I see sheep it's from the window of my car as I drive past. I think the only times I've ever been up close to sheep have been at petting zoos. All I really know about sheep is that I like a nice leg of lamb for Sunday dinner. Are you any different? Probably not. So today I'm going to skip all the clever little insights that commentaries give about sheep and jump to the point that Jesus was making in our gospel lesson for today. This is one of those times when Jesus taught by talking about shepherds and sheep. In fact, the verse right after our text is the one where he says, "I am the good shepherd." But in the ten verses we have before us today, he hasn't said that yet. Today, Jesus says, "I am the gate for the sheep." What does that mean? It's all about how Jesus cares for his Church when we can't see him. So today, we want to think about the care he provides. **How does Jesus take care of his sheep?**

I. He gives the ministry to lead them in his Word.

II. He gives the ministry to bless them with eternal life.

I.

Who are the sheep? That's us. Now, in our world, being called a sheep isn't a compliment. But Jesus deliberately chose this image because sheep need a shepherd to survive. They need to be taken care of. We need to be taken care of spiritually. Jesus is the one who takes care of us. But how does he do that? **How does Jesus take care of the sheep? He gives the ministry to lead them in his Word.**

Jesus says, "**I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.**" Even we city slickers can understand the point here. If you belong in the sheep pen, you come in through the gate. If you don't belong, you sneak in some other way. So what is Jesus teaching us? How your shepherds come to you. Your shepherds come through the gate and Jesus says, "I am the gate." So who are the shepherds? Pastors and teachers. Guys like me that God calls to care for your spiritual needs. In fact, the word pastor really means "shepherd." When I had the call to come here to Peace, someone who was familiar with the situation here said to me, "They just need a shepherd." God calls men like me to come and take care of his sheep. He calls our teachers to come and provide spiritual care for our children. Our teachers are very fond of the picture of taking care of Jesus' little lambs.

That's the point of that gate image. The call I received to serve you here seven years ago, the call that each of our teachers received when they came, the call that Mr. Ott received to serve in Wisconsin, and that our new kindergarten teacher accepted this week – all those things are really the work of Christ. Now, it doesn't always look that way. If you come to voters meeting when we're extending a call, it may seem like the conversation turns on a lot of unspiritual topics. But the Holy Spirit still works through his Church and every true shepherd that Jesus sends enters through the gate. Jesus brings the call to him or her.

When a person climbs in by some other way, they are not sent by Jesus. Certainly, this refers to false teachers who impose their will and their unbiblical ideas on the Church. A great many televangelists fall into

this category. They presume to minister to the whole Church and they rain false teaching down on God's people. But so do people who come to a church to push their agenda rather than to listen to God's word. Finally, every person who "feels called" and then goes out and demands the right to serve could be guilty of sneaking into the sheep pen. Jesus chooses to work through the Church to extend his calls. And we follow his lead. That's why our church body puts such an emphasis on not interfering with the call process. It's better if I don't push myself forward for a call that's out there, even if I think I'd like to serve there. Jesus knows where I am and he will call me when he wants me.

There is tremendous comfort in this truth: Jesus sends us the shepherds we need when we need them. God knows his people and he loves them and he knows his workers and how they can best serve the Church. Even when a pastor or a teacher is unfaithful and has their call revoked, Jesus still allowed this congregation instead of that one to go through that difficult time to teach them some spiritual truth that he wanted them to learn. The gate means that Jesus sends the exact people we need.

Jesus says that the sheep listen to their true shepherd's voice, but they run away from a stranger. What is the shepherd's voice? It isn't literally the way we talk. I'm sure that many of you do recognize my voice because you hear me preach week after week. But on the first Sunday I was here, when I was still a stranger to you, you didn't run away. The voice of a pastor or a teacher in this metaphor is his teaching. It's true that you listen to my teaching because Jesus called me to serve here. But it's also true that the people of God listen to the shepherds he sends because they hear a teaching they recognize. They hear the good news of Jesus Christ. That's the voice God gave me here.

Now, there are lots of ways for me to use that voice besides Sunday morning preaching and teaching. Every time I come to you in the hospital with the good news of Jesus' love and forgiveness, you hear the voice God gave me. When you come to me with a problem and I help you understand how God sees that issue and what he promises as you struggle with it, you hear the voice God gave me. When someone you love dies and I remind you of the good confession they made and God's promise of eternal life, you hear that voice. And of course, when our teachers show Jesus to their students, when they run their classrooms on the basis of law and gospel, those children, too, hear the voice of the shepherd God sent them.

Jesus sends shepherds to take us ever deeper into his Word so that our faith grows. That's why the sheep run away from a stranger's voice. You don't want to hear false doctrine here. You want to hear Jesus speaking through us. That ministry naturally becomes an intimate relationship. Jesus says, "**He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.**" The better I know you, the more I'm able to minister to your needs, especially in private. God designed congregational ministry so that your pastors and teachers can learn how the devil tempts you, how the world challenges your faith, how your own sinful nature undermines the work the Holy Spirit does in you and then provide God's gospel antidote to you personally. There simply is no replacement for listening to your struggles, and then sharing Christ with you, and then guiding you as you go out and live your life as a redeemed child of God. The tool is the word, the law and gospel. But the shepherd applies the word to each individual and to every situation according to their own special needs.

II.

This whole concept of shepherding the sheep would've been obvious to the Jews. Or at least, it should've been. John tells us that Jesus had to repeat the lesson because they weren't getting it. In love, he did that. But he focused the lesson more on himself as he carefully led up to that statement, "I am the good shepherd." **How does Jesus care for the sheep? He gives the ministry to bless them with eternal life.**

Life is what the gospel is all about. Jesus says, "**I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.**" The shepherds aren't the only ones who come in through the gate. The sheep do, too. We don't spend all day, every day here. That would be nice, but God created us to live in this sinful world. Yet we are not a part of this world. Our true home is heaven. And we are a part of Jesus' flock, the Church, because we know him, because we have faith in him. We have entered through Jesus into eternal life.

He continues, "**He will come in and go out, and find pasture.**" This is the benefit of Jesus' pastoral care for us. He offers that care through the men and women that he calls to serve. But he is the one who is ultimately working. His power is his word. Through that gospel power, we can come in and can go out. We can venture out into that dangerous and sinful world and come back to the flock and find rest and fellowship

and strength. When we go out, we find pasture – we find all that we need for our body and life here. When we come in, we find all that we need for the life to come because we are on the way home.

Jesus reminds us then that all other voices lead to a different destiny. He says, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** What is the best way to know if your pastors or teachers are truly sent by Christ? Do they point you to him? Do they proclaim him? Do they teach you that your Savior loves you, that he died for you, that your sins are gone and you will live? Or do they reduce your church experience to entertainment? Or to rules to live by? Or to empty platitudes designed just to make you feel good? The thief comes in to steal. The sheep belong to Christ. They are his flock on earth and in heaven. Those who have gone to heaven are safe. But down here, the thieves keep trying to steal us away from this flock and take us to another flock, a flock that finally teaches us that to get to heaven we just have to be good.

The problem, of course, with that is that none of us can be good enough. That’s a hard thing to hear, especially among people who are so decent, at least as the world looks at it. Many people over the years have told me how nice and friendly you are, and that’s a wonderful blessing. But don’t let praise blind you to the spiritual reality that we’re all sinners who deserve nothing but death and hell. Even our best, our most friendly, nice, kind actions are still contaminated by sin. They are not good enough. Only Christ was good enough. His life counts for us. He died to pay for the sin that contaminates all our best efforts. He rose and declared that now, in God’s sight, we are perfect, even though our own lives are not. He rose to tell us that God counts his life and his death as ours.

That is the message of the true shepherd sent from Christ. That message is what protects us from the thief. The thief comes to steal and kill and destroy. Every false teacher is a spiritual murderer. As he leads people away from Christ, he leads them to death and hell. But Jesus came to give us life. He came to assure us that we are loved and forgiven and we will live with him. Knowing that makes our lives here different. Jesus came so that we can have life to full, spiritual life in abundance. The more we know Christ, the more we live for Christ, the more joy we have in his love and the more strength we have to face sin and trial and difficulty here.

But ultimately, our real life isn’t here. It isn’t even in heaven, where we go when we die. Our real life is after the resurrection. Just as Christ rose, we will rise. We will live in a perfect world. We will see our shepherd and revel in his love for all eternity. We will have life to the full with him forever. All that God gives us through his word. The gospel is what Jesus uses to care for his sheep. The shepherd from Christ comes to proclaim that gospel to us, every day of our lives, in every circumstance of our lives, until we live with Jesus. Every time a shepherd points you to Christ, Christ himself is working to keep you strong in the faith and bring you home. Jesus cares for you, his sheep. Amen.