

**The following is a sample of one Sunday’s resources.
Not shown are the introductory comments about preaching
Matthew and John, and remarks about preaching
stewardship. Not shown are bulletin covers and inserts.**

Considering the Text



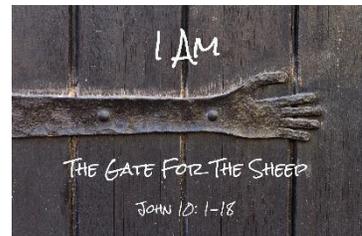
FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

May 7, 2017

John 10:1-10

In the Preacher’s Introduction to the Gospel of John, we observed that preachers sometimes think that stewardship does not have a high profile, but that a closer look reveals that matters related to stewardship are at the heart of this Gospel, especially when one thinks of stewardship as responding appropriately to the presence and purposes of God with time, talent, money, and other resources.

John 10:1-10, focused on Jesus as the gate to the sheepfold, has a place under this umbrella. The passage does not call from the page, “Stewardship found here!” But when we look more closely, we discover that following Jesus through the gate brings us into a field of stewardship. Indeed, in the unusual logic that often works in connection with the things of God, the practice of stewardship can enlarge our sense of Jesus as the gate and can itself become a means whereby the Good Shepherd feeds us.



Moving towards the notion of Jesus as the gate to salvation, a preacher could do quite a lot with different kinds of gates and different purposes for gates. However, in the sermon, the free play of the imagination must eventually be disciplined by an exegetically and theologically responsible interpretation of Jesus the gate.

Exegetical and Homiletical Comments

Scholars debate whether John 10:1-10 was originally one passage or whether it brings together two traditions—vss. 1-6 and vss. 7-10. For this discussion, I consider the text from its standpoint as a literary/theological whole in the Fourth Gospel.

Sheep, Sheepfold, and Gate in Everyday Life in the Ancient World

The passage draws on images from everyday life associated with sheep. Sheep were important to people in antiquity as sources of milk, meat, wool, skins, and dung. Sheep supported the life of the community. They contributed food, clothing, housing, hides, and fuel.

I have found in Bible studies in congregations that many middle-class North Americans, for whom pooper-scoopers are a way of life, are surprised that the ancients regarded dung as a resource. Yet, people in Bible used dung for fuel. The ancients made maximum use of the sheep, using nearly all of its parts. This practice has a stewardship point for our waste-happy culture. In a time when we are becoming increasingly ecologically aware, the church can encourage maximum use of our material resources.

At night, people in antiquity typically put sheep in a fenced in area. In towns and villages, houses often had sheep pens attached to houses. Such a pen had a gate. Away from town and villages, shepherds often kept sheep in the country for long periods of time. The shepherds built pens in these areas. The sheep grazed in the open country during the day, but were secluded in the pen at night. These pens, too, had gates.

A gate had multiple purposes in the world of the Bible. A gate defined the point of entrance and exit. A person or animal passing through the gate passed from the domain, possibilities, and expectations of life on one side to the domain, possibilities, and expectations on the other side. A gate kept out predators (animal and human). In the case of the flock of sheep, it kept the flock safe from harm from the outside. A gate kept safe those who were inside. In the case of the flock, it kept the flock in the pen, thereby keeping the flock from wandering off in the night and falling off a cliff or presenting itself as a meal for a wild animal.

The role of the sheep pen and the gate is to create a safe space in which the flock can grow. One of my colleagues, Clark Williamson, says, similarly, “At the very least, the church should be a safe place for Christians.” Stewardship is intended to help the church become such a community.

A Kind Word for Sheep (And a Caution to Preachers)

When I was in school, I served as an interim minister and preached on the Good Shepherd from John 10:11-18. Like so many preachers, I compared human beings to sheep. I described sheep as unintelligent, following one another around in group-think, not being very hardy, etc. It is easy to correlate such characteristics with human behavior.

Being new to the congregation, I did not know we had a sheep-raiser in our midst. He made an appointment for the following week and arrived at the office with literature, reinforced by his personal experience with sheep. The point he regarded most important is that intelligence tests show that sheep are quite intelligent. For instance, they do very well on a maze test. They learn quickly how to find food in a test that puts food in containers with various colors and shapes, and the sheep have to learn to associate the colors and shapes with the presence of food. Sheep can remember faces (both sheep and human), and, yes, can respond to their names. Sheep are as intelligent as monkeys.

Whereas I chided sheep for their herd instinct, he pointed out that the main protection sheep have against predators is that very ability to stay together. When threatened, the large flock presents a predator with a more difficult target than a sheep acting by itself.

He pointed out that mountain sheep thrive in the wild in very difficult terrain and with scant food.

Moreover, he confessed that, as a human being, he felt devalued and even caricatured by my extended caricature of the sheep.

A capable shepherd takes advantage of the positive qualities of sheep when working with the flock. The shepherd aims to create conditions in which sheep have the resources they need to thrive—such as food, water, guidance, and protection.

A preacher can do the same by laying less emphasis on what the congregation is not doing in the way of stewardship and by giving more emphasis to what a congregation can do. Preachers typically find it easier to depict the negative (e.g. how human beings are similar to what I once thought were the negative qualities of sheep) than the positive. But I have come to think that people respond more deeply, especially over the long haul, to the lure of the positive.

Here are some questions for the preacher.

- What are the strengths of the congregation with regard to stewardship that resonate with the strengths of the flock of sheep?
- How can the congregation build on its positive similarities to sheep with respect to stewardship? How can the congregation make the good things better?

Background in Ezekiel

John assumed that readers in John's congregation would remember Ezekiel 34 which contrasts two kinds of shepherds—false and true. These associations are rife with stewardship implications.

The false shepherds - leaders of Israel - violated covenant and created conditions in the community that had led to exile. Instead of feeding the sheep, the false shepherds fed themselves with the sheep. "You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the

sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (Ezekiel 34:4).

The leaders of Israel were poor stewards of the gifts and responsibilities of the covenant. Indeed, one could say they were anti-stewards. The wider community was complicit, of course.

Two things happened as consequences. First, the sheep were scattered; that is, the community went into exile. The flock paid a price for disobedience. Second, the leaders themselves were dethroned. “I will demand my sheep at their hand, and put a stop to their feeding the sheep” (Ezekiel 34:10).

By contrast, God, the true shepherd of Israel, will assume management of the sheep. God will regather the flock, return them to their own land, and feed them with good pasture. God will “seek the lost . . . bring back the strayed . . . bind up the injured . . . strengthen to weak,” but destroy the fat and strong (Ezekiel 34:16).

Similar themes occur in Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Zechariah 11:4-17.

According to these prophets, the health and vitality of the flock is tied directly to stewardship of the resources that God provides—the covenant and its way of life, which includes the material resources of land and animals. When we use these resources to feed the flock, the flock grows strong and healthy. When we use such resources to feed ourselves, the flock weakens and our own strength diminishes. Indeed, flocks can disappear.

Leaders bear a special responsibility, though not a sole responsibility. The preacher wants to set a visionary tone when speaking about stewardship.

Thieves in John 10

In the Preacher’s Introduction, we describe John’s congregation as a synagogue gathered around Jesus as the Word, and in tension with traditional synagogues, likely Pharisaic, down the street. John retrojects this later conflict into the Fourth Gospel in which the Pharisees in the narrative represent the Pharisees of John’s later time. As we note further, in the Preacher’s Introduction, the preacher needs to help the congregation recognize the historical and theological conditioning here, especially as it contributes to anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism.

In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus is repeatedly in conflict with Pharisees (and with a wider group of Jewish leaders often called “the Jews”). In John 9:1-41, the Johannine Jesus has accused the Pharisees of banning those who believe in Jesus from their synagogue (John 9:22, 34).

John 10:1-10 directly comments on the picture of the Pharisees that John has just painted in John 9 and that is in the broader Johannine narrative. The congregation is in a situation similar to that of the flock. The Pharisees are thieves and bandits who enter the sheepfold for nefarious purposes (John 10:1). They come only to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10).

From the perspective of John's world view (described in the Preacher's Introduction), they are agents of the world. In Ezekiel's language, they are false shepherds. From John's perspective, the false shepherds, beginning with the Pharisees, steal the way that leads to life from the congregation. They offer to the congregation as its highest possibilities the values and practices of the world—death, hate, sin, law, falsehood, misperception, hunger, scarcity, brokenness, fractured community, and condemnation.

Unfortunately, the church contains instances of ministers, treasurers, and others who steal from the church's resources. This is false shepherding, false stewardship, of the worst kind. To find up-to-the-minute examples of such banditry, all a preacher has to do is enter "pastor steals from church" into a search engine. I wonder if this kind of thing is more common than we encounter it in the news. I know of three such cases within five miles of my house that never reached the media. Whether or not publicly reported, such incidents of theft are traumatic for the congregation. It takes a congregation years to recover—both financially and emotionally. And whether or not such an incident hits the news, people hear about it, and it calls into question the integrity of the church and its leadership. The thief takes more than the money.

While most such reports are simple thievery, there are occasional stories of ministers (and others) who take money in order to give it to the poor and vulnerable. While a Robin Hood instinct may have laudable points, honesty

The preacher might ponder the degree to which the church (or the minister) thieves in other ways. For example, ministers sometimes rob congregations of initiative, and congregations sometimes do the reverse. Some ministers beat up their congregations with so much emphasis on the congregation's sin and implication in injustice that the congregations become immobilized by guilt and lose their power to act for transformation.

Jesus the Shepherd and Knowing Your Name

By comparison, Jesus is the good (true) shepherd. The language of John 10:1-6 directly contrasts what Jesus offers the congregation with what the traditional Pharisees misleadingly offer. This language directly resonates with the situation of John's congregation.

Unlike the Pharisees and other leaders who attempt to enter the flock's Jesus-centered theological consciousness in a dishonest way and to steal the flock's identity, Jesus enters (and exits) by the gate, the recognized point of entry and exit. Moreover, in an expression that Christians especially love, Jesus "calls [Jesus'] own sheep by name." The best shepherds in the Bible lands could indeed call sheep by name. The sheep did recognize the shepherd's voice.

In our increasingly postmodern culture, many people find identity and community in local and virtual communities. But a good many feel as if almost no one really knows their names. Some, indeed, feel nameless. Even many who have connections to communities feel as though they must hide part of themselves. The word can speak a word of promise to such situations: Jesus

knows your name. Jesus knows you in the depths. And Jesus invites you into the fold. At its best—through faithful stewardship—the church itself can speak a person’s name, and hold the person’s deepest self in safety.

Moreover, Jesus the shepherd can lead the sheep out of the sheepfold so they can graze in the pasture; that is, so they can have access to the things that lead to life. John, of course, has in mind the nourishment that comes from the full scope of the revelation that comes from Jesus in the Fourth Gospel—the Word coming down from heaven, the revelatory teaching and discourses and the revelatory encounters. John vividly says that Jesus goes ahead of the sheep, thus anticipating John 14:1-7 where Jesus goes to prepare a place for the flock. The congregation follows Jesus because they recognize and trust Jesus in the way that sheep recognize and trust their shepherd.

Jesus the Gate who Opens into Life Abundant

At one level in John 10:5, John reports on sheep behavior: they do not follow a stranger, and actually run from a stranger. At another level, John suggests that the congregation do exactly what the sheep do: run from the mistaken leadership (voice) of the Pharisees, the thieves and bandits.

Not only does Jesus enter and exit by the gate—the recognized point of entering and departing—but he *is* the gate (John 10:2, 9). As we note in the Preacher’s Introduction, he opens the way to fullness of life with God.

Furthermore, those who enter the sheepfold will be saved. In a statement that Christians probably quote as often as many other to summarize the ministry of Jesus: “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

In this context, John means by salvation and life: the qualities of existence associated with heaven: love, forgiveness, grace, Spirit, truth, sight (deep perception), abundance, fullness, freedom, and community/oneness. These qualities begin in the present as the believer lives in a sphere of heaven within the world, and they reach completion after the believer follows Jesus on the way to the heavenly sphere (John 14:1-7).

A person enters the sheepfold (the congregation) by entering through Jesus, that is, by believing in Jesus. Jesus opens the gate by becoming the Word who comes down from heaven and reveals God and the possibilities of life

As we said in the Preacher’s Introduction, John’s congregation had the feeling of being in a situation of uncertainty, chaos, and conflict. Their identity was under threat. This passage partakes of the larger purpose of the Fourth Gospel to reinforce their sense of confidence in Jesus and to remain in the congregation through a season of struggle (and to persuade the congregation not to follow the Pharisees). You can trust your continued participation in the congregation because Jesus its shepherd, the religious interpreter who can enter and exit, who

has the best interest of the sheep at heart, who knows them by name, and who can lead the flock from its present pasture in this world to eternal life, to a pasture in which existence itself is fully sustaining in a way that never runs out.

The Gate Opens to Stewardship

The Preacher's Introduction points out that the Fourth Gospel is sectarian and that the commandment to love one another applies directly only to other members of John's community. However, we can extend the line of logic that begins with the notion of God loving the world to the possibility of expressing this love for others in the world and for the world itself. This opens the gate to stewardship.

Jesus is the gate. Those who go into the sheepfold do so through believing in him. When they go through the gate, they are in sheepfold where the Holy Spirit (the Paraclete, the Advocate, and the Comforter) is with them always. For John, the Spirit is the continuing presence of Jesus with the believing community, thus enabling the sheep to engage in the same kind of shepherding activity for one another as Jesus.

Jesus thus not only opens the gate to the practice of stewardship, but also empowers it. The Fourth Gospel does not use this language, but the shepherd (Jesus) is the prototype for the sheep. Jesus loves the sheep, and does for them the kinds of things a shepherd does. Jesus commands them to love one another, which implies that they are to do the kinds of things for one another that a shepherd does (John 13:31-35).

To love is to give oneself for the good of the community on the model of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and subsequently going to the cross. They are to use the materials in the world for the purposes of revealing and embodying God's love. From the perspective of John's world view (as depicted in the Preacher's Introduction), those who love Jesus—stewards—are to reveal the qualities of heaven in the midst of the world.

An important question for the stewardship sermon is: How can our church budget—and our use of time, talent, and resources—join Jesus in revealing life, love, forgiveness, grace, Spirit, truth, sight (deep perception), abundance, fullness, freedom, community/oneness, and salvation in the midst of the world with its opposite qualities (death, hate, sin, law, falsehood, misperception, hunger, scarcity, brokenness, fractured community, and condemnation)?

Stewardship as a Means through which God Feeds

The imagery for Jesus in the Fourth Gospel indicates that Jesus does not simply impose a moral responsibility by commanding the disciples to love one another. Jesus infuses the community with power and takes the lead. As the Word, Jesus dwells with the community. Like a host at the wedding, Jesus keeps their communion cups filled with wine. Like a companion at the well, Jesus gives them living water (i.e. the Holy Spirit). As the bread of life and the vine nourishing

the branches which bear the fruit, Jesus feeds and sustains them. As a shepherd, Jesus cares for the sheep and leads them. Jesus infuses them with the things that sustain life.

The more the congregation engages in stewardship—the more the congregation loves in the way that Jesus loves—the more we discover Jesus’ continuing and empowering presence. The more we give, the more satisfying is the act of giving.

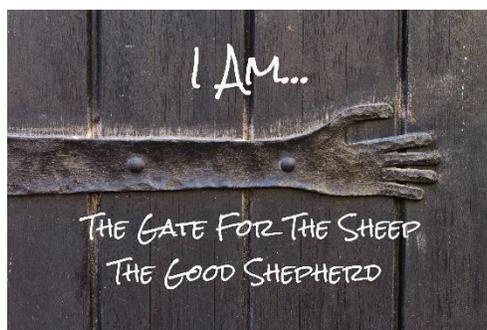
I know people in the church (and truthfully, I know people not in the church) who are genuinely empowered by this kind of shepherding.

To be honest, I also know people in the church—and certainly beyond—who use stewardship activities to serve their own ends. They create their own dominions in which exercise of power becomes a means to satisfy their own egos.

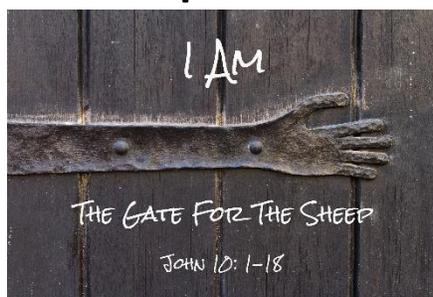
Possibilities for the Big Screen

The central image of the passage—the gate—suggests the possibility of the worship team using a picture or drawing of a sheep gate from the world of the Bible on the big screen. Indeed, as part of the larger service, or perhaps as part of the movement of the sermon, the team might use pictures of different gates, or might use slides depicting approaching a gate, opening it, passing through the gateway, closing it, and settling into life on the other side.

The worship team could also create a number of slides associated with sheep that would have been typical of the ancient biblical world. Moreover, many in today’s congregation will be interested in the different products from sheep such as milk, cheese, sheep pens next to houses, sheep pens in the open country, wool, and lambs skin. My dad graduated from college in 1929 with an actual sheepskin diploma.



Worship Materials



Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 10:1-10

Suggestions for the Service

Since this is the first service in a three-week stewardship campaign, the worship planners and preacher will want to help the congregation to add the stewardship emphasis to the resurrection emphasis of the Sundays after Easter, and to identify the campaign as a three week affair.

Orientation to the Service

I am so glad that Easter comes in the spring. The message of resurrection comes at a time when nature itself dramatizes resurrection. Over the past weeks in nature, the leaves have come out. The grass has become green. The daffodils and crocus have given way to the early summer flowers.

In Easter worship, we began with the appearance of the Risen Jesus, the first burst of green at the end of theological branch, so to speak. Week by week we have felt the effects of the resurrection broadening into life: Jesus with us at the Table as he was with the travelers on the road to Emmaus, and Jesus with us as he was with the disciples in the upper room, breathing the Holy Spirit on us and standing with us when we, like Thomas, have our doubts.

Today we broaden a little more as we begin our three-week stewardship campaign. The biblical text for each Sunday comes from the Gospel of John. Today our focus is on Jesus as the gate to life, and the gate to stewardship. Next week the text is the famous, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life." How do we follow the way of Jesus in stewardship? The final week, Commitment Sunday, the text is, "I will ask [God] and [God] will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth . . ." We do not engage in stewardship under our own power. The Holy Spirit operates through us.

It may seem a little unusual to have a stewardship emphasis next week, Mother's Day. But I think you will agree with me that Mother's Day and stewardship can fit together like hand and glove.

Call to Worship

One: There are many gates in life: gates to yards and courtyards and pools and fields and warehouses and prisons.

Many: Gates to hearts and heads, wallets and checkbooks.

One Some are closed.

Many: Some are open.

One: Some keep us locked in.

Many: Some keep us locked out.

One: Some imprison us.

Many: Some give us freedom.

One: Jesus is a gate.

Many: Jesus is the gate to life, love, forgiveness, grace, Spirit, truth, sight abundance, fullness, freedom, community, and salvation.

One: Jesus invites us to walk through this gate and receive this world.

Many: Jesus invites us to share this world with others.

Opening Prayer

O God, you have revealed the gateway to life through Jesus Christ. Help us walk through his gate and to embrace the life, love, forgiveness, grace, Spirit, truth, sight, abundance, fullness, freedom, community, and salvation that Jesus offers. As we turn our attention to stewardship for these three short weeks, help us not only embrace these qualities of life for our individual and household lives, but also empower us to imagine how our time, talent, money, and other resources can become part shaping our congregation, our neighborhood, and beyond into a community revealing these qualities as your possibilities for all.

Invitation to the Offering

The text contrasts thieves and shepherds. Coming to this moment of offering asks us to consider: which would you like to be more like?

People who steal take things for their own use, regardless of the consequences to the community. A person who steals is someone who takes money, or who breaks into a home and carts off a giant-screen TV, or takes someone else's idea and presents as if it is hers or his.

Such things—no matter how small—eat away at the trust among members of a community. And I think they eat away at the soul of the person who steals.

A shepherd, on the other hand, is a person who builds up community. The shepherd seeks to feed the sheep, to find nourishing pasture, to keep the flock safe. A well-kept flock generates milk, wool, meat, skin (hide), and other things that add to the community.

A healthy congregation, like a healthy flock, needs the resources to thrive. When the community thrives, its members can thrive.

The text also develops Jesus' words, "I am the gate." The offering plate is an expression of this gate. When the plate passes before us, we indicate the degree to which we want to be aligned more with the world of those who steal, or more with the world of the shepherd, the flock, and the things that make for life.

This is an opportunity to say, "I want to walk through the gate that is Jesus into life abundant, and I want to be part of helping the church become a gateway for abundant life for others."

Invitation to the Table

One of the dangers of the stewardship season is that we place so much emphasis on the decisions that we human beings make that we may unconsciously think that we are acting by ourselves. As a preacher I put a lot of emphasis on the choices that you and I make when it comes to how we use our time, talent, money, and other resources. And, what we do makes a big difference.

But when we come to this Table, we remember that when it comes to making a stewardship decision, we are not alone. The one who is the gate is also the shepherd, and one of the most important things in a shepherd's vocation is to feed the sheep.

The bread and the cup are physical reminders of the constant if unseen presence of the living shepherd. When we think about stewardship, Jesus sits at the desk, brooding with us over our resources and the needs of the church and the world. Jesus helps us imagine how we can participate with him in helping the world become more a sphere of life, love, peace, joy, forgiveness, justice, and abundance. Jesus steadies our hands as we pick up the pen to make a commitment or as we click the numbers on the computer keyboard.

And the text says Jesus "calls [the] sheep by name, and leads them out." Jesus knows your name. Jesus knows *your* name. And Jesus is with us week by week and month by month as we live into the commitments we make today. The bread and the cup are signs and seals of the promise we make to Jesus.

Some Possible Hymns and Songs

"Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us," *New Century Hymnal* 252; *Chalice Hymnal* 558

"God is My Shepherd," *New Century Hymnal* 479; *Chalice Hymnal* 79

"My Shepherd, You Supply My Need," *New Century Hymnal* 247; *Chalice Hymnal* 80

"The King of Love My Shepherd Is," *New Century Hymnal* 248

"Such Perfect Love My Shepherd Shows," *New Century Hymnal* 248

"Father Almighty, Bless Us," *New Century Hymnal* 518

"My Shepherd is the Living God," *New Century Hymnal* 247
"The Lord's My Shepherd," *Chalice Hymnal* 78
"Gift of Finest Wheat," *Lead Me, Guide Me* 136
"His Name is Wonderful," *Lead Me, Guide Me* 87
"Shepherd Me, O God," *The Faith We Sing*, 2058
"Shepherd of My Soul," Ruth C. Duck, *Circles of Caring: Hymns and Songs*, 2
"You are the Shepherd," Jaroslav J. Vajda, *Now the Joyful Celebration: Hymns, Carols, and Songs*, 45
"The Good Shepherd Hymn," <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/ns/89>
"Gentle Shepherd, Come and Lead Us," <http://www.songlyrics.com/gaither-vocal-band/gentleshepherd-lyrics/>



John 10:1-10

Small Group Lesson

By Liz DeWeese

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in



by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Point of Inspiration

The fourth gospel reminds us that Jesus is the revelation of God in the world. God is revealed to us through Jesus the Word made flesh who dwelled among us. Today the evangelist reminds us that Jesus not only shows the way to life abundant in God’s love, but Jesus is the way. Jesus is the gate to life and the gate to stewardship. When we follow Jesus’ example of generosity life grows.

Opening Prayer

Creator God who is Love, who speaks all creation into being and who gifts the world You love with Your heir in order to show us the way to You, remind us of Your desire for us to follow Jesus and live in Your love as he exemplifies. Loosen the tethers of fear and security we have tied from our perceived control, so that we will rely on you to provide what we need and in abundance, enough to share. And in your generous provision invite us again to share generously with the world, as we learn and as we act, we pray in Jesus’ holy name, Amen.

Reading the Scripture

In your first reading of the text consider reading as if you have never read this passage before. (Teachers may consider sharing a few things about John’s perspective of the world found in “Preacher’s Introduction to the Gospel of John,” and Dr. Ron Allen’s materials for this particular passage. Specifically, John’s understanding of God’s love, also the intent that his gospel is written to a specific group of Jewish people who believed in Jesus and had been rejected by the Pharisees, and some specifics about sheep and shepherding.)

Before reading ask the class to consider the following questions:

1. What stands out to you when you read/hear this passage?
2. What questions come to mind at first reading of this passage?
3. What is jumps out as having to do with stewardship?
4. What is comforting about this passage and what is troubling about it?

The class should read all the way through the text once considering the above questions before engaging the rest of the study.

Studying the Word

Glimpses of God

Have you ever had one of those moments when you were certain you had been in the presence of God? Maybe you felt it physically like a brush of wind across your skin, or the sound of a voice in your head that you knew as not yours. Maybe you felt a powerful warmth in your chest

as you were overwhelmed by the impact of a moment. Maybe you were witness to an act of love that gave you hope. These are the moments that preachers like to refer to as the Holy breaking into the earthly realm – glimpses of heaven. Today as we study this passage we are invited to consider:

1. Where have we seen the Holy breaking into the earthly realm/ when have we experienced glimpses of heaven?
2. How do those glimpses give us hope for today and tomorrow?
3. How does that hope drive us to share (steward) God with others?

Read verses 10:1-5

It may help in understanding this passage to understand some things about sheep especially in the gospel writer's world. Sheep are actually very intelligent animals (despite popular opinion). They remember and recognize faces, both sheep and human. They herd together for protection, though occasionally the temptation of grazing pastures will lead them astray. They know the people who take care of them and they follow a familiar voice to safety, but run from a strange voice just like it was a predator.

In the gospel writer's world sheep were seen as a valuable and necessary resource. They produced milk and wool, and dung which was used for fuel. But they were also a source of meat, and their hides were used for everything from clothing to shelter to a writing surface. Sheep were necessary for survival. To protect sheep at night they would be penned either in a pen attached to a house or if they belonged to shepherds with large herds they would often pen them together with other sheep out in the middle of fields and wilderness. There they would be protected from predators and from wondering off and falling off a cliff or into a hole. In the mornings when the shepherds would open the pen they would each call their own sheep and the herds would follow their shepherd.

Consider for a moment the comfort that comes when someone you love calls you by name, or even by a nickname. Consider the reduction of stress as dopamine levels rise in your brain when you feel safe and assured that someone who cares for you knows you and calls you by name. According to this gospel, loves the world so much that God sent God's heir into the world to reveal God's love and to reconcile the world to God (adaptation of John 3:16-17). Consider for a moment what it feels like to have the heir of God call you by name in order to reveal God's love to you. How would that make you feel? What do you want to do when the Heir calls you by name?

Read verses 10:6-10

Jesus tells them this parable about being the shepherd and not a thief, but the listeners don't get it, so he tells them another parable. This time Jesus is actually the gate.

One of the things we need to be careful with in John's gospel is how we hear what the author says about "the Jews" or "the Pharisees." These parables follow a story of a healing of a Blind man. John loves a metaphor, so that we are dealing with sight is important. Jesus heals the man

on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees have a field day judging Jesus and the formerly blind man and his parents, rather than celebrating that the man can see. So when Jesus is speaking about “thieves” in these parables, he is referring to the Pharisees. But the bigger picture is that John’s congregation is likely Jewish but has been rejected from the synagogue because they proclaim Jesus. So John is likely angry, and even hurt, and feels protective of his congregation, thus his language about “the Jews” or even “the Pharisees” is intended to help a hurting congregation heal from the oppression and rejection of a larger body. It is not meant to be a rejection of the Jewish faith completely, nor the people of Israel, nor all of those who were in leadership.

What is important to us in the study of this passage in relationship to stewardship is that Jesus came to reveal God’s love for the world, to reconcile the world to God by teaching the world how to live God’s love for one another, and to show the world the way to eternal love in heaven, another realm. When Jesus is teaching about thieves who come to steal, kill, and destroy, the author of John is reminding the reader that false shepherds (beginning with the Pharisees who are rejecting the faithful from the synagogue) “steal the way that leads to life. They offer to the congregation as its highest possibilities the values and practices of the world—death, hate, sin, law, falsehood, misperception, hunger, scarcity, brokenness, fractured community, and condemnation.”¹ If these things are the fruits of our congregations, we are not following our shepherd; we are not passing through the gate.

Jesus, who is the gate, leads to green pastures, that the sheep may have life and have it abundantly. The gate leads to “the qualities of existence associated with heaven: love, forgiveness, grace, Spirit, truth, sight (deep perception), abundance, fullness, freedom, and community/oneness. These qualities begin in the present as the believer lives in a sphere of heaven within the world, and they reach completion after the believer follows Jesus on the way to the heavenly sphere (John 14:1-7).”²

Where do you see glimpses of heaven in your own life? (Consider the list of the qualities of heaven in the paragraph above.)

Where do you see glimpses of heaven in the life of your congregation? Where and how is God blessing your ministry right now? What can you name that is a blessing from your church to you? What can you name that is a blessing from your church to others?

Living the Word

What does this passage have to do with stewardship? Consider for a moment how you felt when you were imagining Jesus calling your name in order to reveal God’s love to you. Consider too, how you were feeling when you named some of the ‘where’s’ and ‘how’s’ of the glimpses

¹ Dr. Ron Allen, from this resource “Considering the Text” 2017 May 7 Fourth Sunday of Easter John 10:1-10

² Ibid.

of heaven in your life, and in the life and ministry of your church. Now imagine keeping that only to yourself. What happens to that love? It dies with you.

Sheep are communal animals. They share with one another in order to protect one another but also to proliferate the herd. If they do not share, if they do not care for one another, if they do not call to one another, they will die.

The church has been given a gift. It is the gift of a way to life abundant. Life and love perpetuate because they are shared and given away.

How will you perpetuate your faith by sharing love? What are some tangible ways that you will share the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ with someone who is not a member of your congregation? What are some ways your congregation can offer glimpses of heaven to your community?

Conclusion

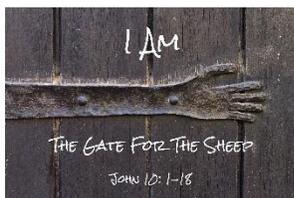
Jesus is the shepherd who knows us by name and Jesus is the gate through which Christians pass in order to glimpse heaven, the love of God. In order to show the world love we must act out of love. And that love does not look like sidelines passivity, it looks like active acts of justice for the least of these. The hymn/camp song reminds us that the world will know we are Christians, by our love, by our love...but do they? Believers have the responsibility to share, to be stewards of God's love, and of the realm of heaven. We must point to it and name it when we glimpse it, so they will know God's love is real and the promise is for all.

Closing Prayer

God, whose name is Love, shower us and surround us in Your powerful love. Help us to find You at our center and help us to make You the center of our joy. Then fill us to overflowing so that we have no choice but to share You with the world we meet. For we pray it in the name of the gate who is the way, Amen.

A Message for Children

John 10:1-10: Stewardship means protecting our resources.



The scripture notes for today tell us that “following Jesus through the gate brings us into a field of stewardship,” and discusses other ways that Jesus is a gate. The role of the gate in this story is to protect the sheep so they can grow and prosper. With the children, we will not make the leap from sheep in the pen to Jesus or parents or money, rather we’re just going to explore with them why a gate might be important for a flock of sheep. You can use a stuffed sheep or the shepherd/sheep set from Worship and Wonder to help you with this lesson.

Gather the children:

Do you know what a shepherd is? (Allow for some answers, but steer them towards “the person who takes care of the sheep” type answers). Yes, a shepherd is someone who takes care of a flock of sheep. I’m going to tell you a story about 2 different shepherds.

Once upon a time there were 2 shepherds with huge flocks of sheep. They loved their sheep very much and wanted to give their sheep everything the sheep wanted and needed.

The first shepherd let his sheep graze all over the hillside and then when it got dark at night he just said “goodnight sheep” and let the sheep frolic in the moonlight. The sheep LOVED frolicking in the moonlight and loved their shepherd for letting them stay out under the stars.

The second shepherd also let his sheep graze all over the hillside. But at night when it got dark, he made his sheep go into a pen. He counted them one by one and locked the gate behind them. The sheep looked out at the other sheep frolicking on the hillside and they were sad because they couldn’t have a midnight dance party.

Then, a wolf showed up. What do you think happened next? (Allow the children to answer, but try not to let it get too scary or gory, steer the children towards answers like “the sheep in the pen were safer”). So which shepherd did the better job? The one who gave the sheep what they wanted or the shepherd who protected his flock, even if they didn’t like it?

I think it was the second shepherd. He was protecting his sheep and protecting his resources. Sometimes, we have a big word to describe what the shepherd did—it’s called STEWARDSHIP, and from time to time we’re going to talk about this big word. Our shepherd practiced stewardship by protecting his sheep.

Prayer with children:

Dear God, thank you for shepherds that protect their sheep and for sheep that are happy being cared for. Please help me to take care of my things, too! Amen

Taking the lesson home:

One way for children to take this lesson home is to encourage families to count how many gates/fences they see during the week (on their drives, or on the school bus or in their own neighborhoods). Some questions caregivers/parents/adults can ask about these fences/gates might include:

- Do you think that gate is protecting anything?
- Do you see any sheep or animals on the other side of that fence?
- Do you think those animals are being protected?
- How many sheep/goats/cows do you see?

Engaging children with these questions and then reminding them of the lesson from Sunday is a great way to reinforce the message and help children see real-life examples of how fences/gates protect resources.



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