

Pastor Joe Polzin  
John 10:1-10  
“Good Door Sunday?”  
Year A – Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 7, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our risen Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

This Fourth Sunday of Easter is well known every year as Good Shepherd Sunday. We hear those comforting words from Psalm 23 – “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want...” We read a portion of the Good Shepherd chapter, John chapter 10. There was actually something quite unique in our Gospel reading today.

In our three-year lectionary cycle, we read the first part of this Good Shepherd chapter this year, the middle part next year, and the last part in the third year. So, tell me, in which verse does Jesus call himself the Good Shepherd? It actually says it in verse 11, but that’s part of the reading for next year. But we know it’s coming, don’t we? We’re anticipating it. And it’s certainly true, Jesus *is* our Good Shepherd. But I would say we miss something when we jump ahead like that. Because Jesus actually calls himself something else in our Gospel today, but it’s not a Shepherd. Did you catch it? He says, *I am the door*.

In verse 7 – “I am the door of the sheep...” and verse 9 – “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” Perhaps today should be called the “Good Door Sunday,” but, then again, that’s not quite as catchy.

There’s a reason Jesus is talking about being the door for the sheep before he identifies himself as the Good Shepherd, and in order find out what that reason is, we have to consider the context, we have to consider what has just happened in John’s Gospel. Chapter 10 is a continuation of chapter 9, and chapter 9 is devoted to the story of the man born blind. It was our Gospel reading in church just a little over a month ago.

It’s an important account, and, if you recall, the main theme of chapter 9 was, on one hand, belief in Jesus, and therefore salvation, or, on the other hand, rejection of Jesus, and therefore condemnation. Jesus healed the blind man, leading him to true faith in Jesus as Lord. But the Pharisees, convinced Jesus was a sinner for not observing the laws about the Sabbath and healing on that day, rejected Jesus, and rejected the man, as they cast him out from the synagogue. And Jesus says at the end of the chapter, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (9:39).

The man who had been blind was the one who not only regained his physical sight, but the sight of faith that allowed him to see Jesus as Lord. And he was saved. And the Pharisees, who assumed because of who they were as the leaders, as the shepherds, of Israel, thought they could see, but they were the ones who were actually blind. So they were condemned.

It’s while Jesus is still talking to this group of Pharisees that chapter 10 begins. Look at John 10:1 again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.” Now, we know that Jesus is soon going to call himself the Good Shepherd, so our mind may quickly assume that the shepherd Jesus is talking about here is himself. But not yet! When we consider the context of the passage, we see that Jesus is still talking to the shepherds of the day, the pastors, of Israel – the Pharisees.

Jesus is making the distinction between a faithful pastor and an unfaithful one. A faithful pastor is one who “enters by the door,” to whom “the gatekeeper opens,” whose voice the “sheep hear” as he “calls his own sheep by name and leads them out,” and who “goes before” the sheep, leading them into the pasture (10:2-4). But the Pharisees didn’t understand what Jesus was getting at, so he makes it clearer, and that’s when he tell them that *he* is the door. If sheep are led faithfully by their pastor through the door, through Jesus alone, then they will be saved, and are led to abundant life in him.

However, unfaithful pastors are those who lead their flock to something or someone other than Jesus. And unfortunately, the Pharisees, the pastors of Israel, were doing just that. It’s why Jesus speaks in no uncertain terms about them. They had turned the people away from the promise of the Messiah and the salvation that would come from God, and insisted on a rigorous observance of the Law, and that by doing so, they were making themselves holy enough for God. They thought they were “good enough” people in God’s eyes, A) because they were Israelites, and B) because they were strict in the observance of the Law.

But what they were really doing was trying to lead the flock through a door to salvation other than Jesus. And that makes them a thief whose only aim is to “steal and kill and destroy” (10:10). It’s exactly what had just happened to the blind man in chapter 9. He had found the true door, Jesus, the way to eternal and abundant life. But the shepherds, the Pharisees, had him excommunicated because he confessed Jesus as the Christ and Lord. Jesus condemned them because they were acting like thieves and killers, leading God’s flock to eternal damnation. Upon hearing this, they should have repented and come to Jesus asking forgiveness. Instead, because of their sin-fueled stubbornness, they’ll resort, just a few verses later, to calling Jesus demonic, insane, and try to stone him (10:20, 31).

It actually makes Jesus’ proclamation all the more powerful, as he, when he sees God’s people being led blindly by these murderous pastors, says, “*I am the Good Shepherd*” (10:11). Jesus himself steps into the breach so that *he* could lead his people. The Pharisees, who of course resent Jesus for saying all this, will end up killing him, as we recall those Good Friday events. But it’s the Good Shepherd, who by his resurrection from the dead on Easter, proved all his claims about himself and showed just how secure his promises actually are, that not even death could hold him back.

And the implications of all this for us today are so numerous, we’ll touch on only two. First, this provides us with the criteria to see if a pastor, a shepherd of the sheep, is a faithful one or not. The standard doesn’t come down to personality of the pastor, or preference, or preaching style. No, the mark of a faithful pastor is whether or not they lead their sheep by way of the door, Jesus Christ. Do they rightly proclaim God’s Law, which condemns sin and shows us our need for a Savior? And then after the Law has fulfilled its task, do they rightly proclaim God’s Gospel, which forgives sin and delivers to us our Savior, Jesus Christ? All those other things are only helpful insofar as the pastor is faithfully leading the flock through the only way, truth, and life, Jesus Christ.

And considering what makes a faithful shepherd of the sheep is important not only at church, where your pastor is, but anytime you read an article or book by, or listen to, other Christian leaders and pastors. Branching outside the Missouri Synod isn’t wrong by any means, and in many cases can even help strengthen our faith. However, we do have to have a critical ear and always be asking the question, “Is this person proclaiming the forgiveness of sins and salvation through Christ alone, or through something else?”

And it’s unfortunate we have to ask that question, even with people who call themselves

“Christian.” But there are many authors and speakers and pastors who headline Christian events and Christian bookshelves today who preach a gospel of prosperity and blessedness and happiness according to what you do for God, rather than preaching the true Gospel of eternal life according to what God has done for you. They focus on you – your works, your faith, your life. Jesus becomes at best a personal life coach, rather than the Savior who went to the cross and the grave fully on your behalf.

And their message ends up being no better than a flimsy motivational pep-talk, except with a dangerous downside, because what they end up doing is misleading people in matters of eternal significance, and rather than pointing them to Jesus, they point people to themselves. It’s what the Pharisees were doing. The Pharisees, I’m sure, looked the part of a successful religious leader, but all they succeeded in was leading people away from God and from Christ.

Which brings us to the second implication we can draw from this, which is a question that has been at the forefront of human history since the beginning of time: how we are justified before God. It’s a simple question. It has, actually, a simple answer. Jesus puts it plainly, “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (10:9). Unfortunately, we tend to make things that are easy complicated when it comes to our lives.

There have been various studies done throughout the years, asking Christians, *Christians* mind you, how people are saved. And these studies all show the same thing, that the majority of Christians in the U.S., meaning more than 50%, believe that “good people” and even non-Christians may attain eternal life. That there are many ways to get to heaven. Some believe it’s based on how good of a person you are, or that it doesn’t matter what religion you are, as long as you believe something, or that all religions are different perspectives on the same truth, the same God.

But this is in direct opposition to what Scriptures say, what Jesus himself says. “I am the door,” he says, or later in John’s Gospel, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). And some Christians, I think, try to soften the meaning of these words, afraid it’ll sound too exclusive, or too judgmental. But these are the words Christ himself speaks, and it *is* judgmental. It’s God judging any human attempt to earn our way to Him, whether it’s by how well we perform, how good of people we are, or even how strong we believe.

It’s the stubbornness of sinful human hearts that tempts us to believe there’s something we can do to earn salvation. But we’re only making a simple thing more complicated. The Gospel is much better news than that. Salvation is not based on the merits of sinful people. Salvation is based solely on the merits of the one sin-less person, Jesus Christ, who came to forgive and redeem us. Which isn’t exclusive at all. It’s radically inclusive. The *only* way someone can be excluded is if they exclude themselves.

And if we believe this to be true, then it can’t help but change the way we live. First of all, we experience great freedom when we realize it’s not up to us to earn God’s favor. For those who saw the Martin Luther movie this past week, Luther felt the weight of the world lift off his shoulders once he realized that salvation was a gift, not a standard he must keep. We, too, are comforted every day by this wonderful love and grace from our God.

Second, when we realize this freedom, we realize we are now *free* to spend our days loving and serving our neighbor. And of course, serving those around us takes shape in many different ways, including being a good husband and wife, a good child or parent, a good coworker or employee, or a good next door neighbor. But it also includes sharing the good news

of Jesus with them. If we truly believe Jesus is the only way to salvation, and that they will be lost without that good news, doesn't it make it absolutely critical that we share that with a neighbor, a coworker, or perhaps even a family member?

Perhaps that's why so many Christians will try to convince themselves there are many ways to God or to salvation, because it lifts the burden of having to talk about Jesus. But we know it's not true. We know the only and greatest eternal gift is found in Jesus, and there are so many who don't know it. We want and we need to share that good news with others. That's our mission as members of the body of Christ, and as members of Trinity/Mt. Hope Lutheran Church. To point others to the Good Shepherd.

Jesus *is* our Good Shepherd. He is also the door to a very pleasant pasture. We trust him to always lead us, even through valleys with shadows of death. We know that where he leads, is life, and he has come so that we may have it abundantly, both now and forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our risen Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.