

In the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asked His disciples: “Who do the people say the Son of Man is?” They told Him that some said that He is John the Baptist, while others the prophet Elijah, and some even think that He is the prophet Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets. But this was not the answer that Jesus wanted, so He flat out asked them again: “But what about you? Who do you say that I am?” Jesus did not want some theological or book answer; He wanted their honest, personal thoughts, their heart felt belief. And the same is true for you and me today. Jesus does not want some canned answer that we copy from some book or heard someone else say. He wants to know what each one of us thinks about Him; our personal thoughts; what we feel in our hearts; what He means to us and our lives. Because it is not a religion, but a relationship, a personal relationship; we each have the opportunity for a unique relationship with Jesus.

That’s why we are focusing on the question “Who is Jesus” during Lent this year. So that when we celebrate His resurrection on Easter morning and sing *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*, we will know in our hearts who He really is and truly appreciate all that He has done for us, and who knows, we might even shed a tear out of gratitude. To help us answer this question during Lent, we are studying the seven “I Am” sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John. So far, we have discussed three of Jesus’ self-descriptions. Jesus has identified Himself as the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, and last Sunday as the Gate, the only door to God and eternal life. This morning let’s continue with the fourth “I Am” saying which is found in the tenth chapter of John, verses 11 through 18.

Read John 10:11-18

Last Sunday we discussed the first ten verses of the tenth chapter of John. If you remember Jesus identified Himself as the gate for the sheep. When the shepherd was out in the countryside, he would find or construct a makeshift sheep pen with a wall around it and an opening. The shepherd slept in the opening so that the sheep could not get out nor any wild animal could get in. He was literally the gate. In the same way, Jesus tells us that He is the Gate, the only way to God. Jesus came to show us who God is and the way to have a personal relationship with Him. This gate is open to all who will believe and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

However, unlike Jesus, not all gates in life are open; some are closed and access is prohibited. It reminds me of the time that I tried to get into Camp David, the President’s Retreat in Maryland. Early in my career with the Federal Highway Administration, I was working in our Maryland Office and was assigned the job of inspecting the traffic signs on all US highways in Maryland including park and forest roads to ensure that they complied with Federal standards.

Well, the road to Camp David, the President's Retreat, was on this list so I drove up to the main gate. A Marine private comes out and asks me what I wanted. I pulled out my Federal ID and began to tell him why I needed to enter the facility and check out the roads. I almost had him convinced until he turned around and called out: "Sergeant." Out comes this Marine Sergeant with the white sidewall haircut. So, I start into my speech all over again, only to have him quickly stop me and say: "Son, your authority ends right here," pointing to the ground – "turn that car around and get out of here," which I quickly did! That was the closest I ever got to Camp David, but it was worth a try!

Throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, the term "Shepherd" is used to describe God and Jesus. The most familiar one is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm that is our Responsive Reading again this Sunday: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still water. He restoreth my soul." If you haven't figured it out by now, we are considered the sheep of His pasture.

Now some of us may resent being compared to sheep because we have difficulty acknowledging our complete dependence on the Shepherd. We want to live our life on our own terms, but unfortunately as we all know from experience that usually leads to trouble; like sheep without the leadership of the shepherd, we tend to wander off the path and end up scattered and in trouble. So, bear with me this morning and let's acknowledge for a moment that we are sheep and that we definitely need the Good Shepherd.

One of the most familiar scenes in first century Palestine was the figure of a shepherd tending his sheep. Shepherds were regarded as physically strong and courageous. However, the shepherd's life was not one to be envied. It was hard; unlike CEOs of today, there were no vacations, big bonuses or large salaries. The shepherd's work week was 24-7; 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition, he had to face whatever Mother Nature threw his way and endure constant danger from thieves, poachers, and wild animals. Because there was so little grass, he was always on the move searching for new pastures for his flock.

Jesus's audience was well acquainted with the life of a shepherd; so, He used their knowledge about shepherds and sheep to describe the relationship that He and His Father want with all believers. In the time we have this morning, let's discuss this relationship.

In the text from last Sunday, Jesus told us that the shepherd calls each of his sheep by name. In the Near East sheep are not raised for food but for their wool. Thus, each sheep might be with the shepherd for many years; so, the shepherd grew to know and care for them. It was not uncommon for shepherds to give their sheep nicknames – often based on their physical markings, characteristics, or disposition, such as Brown Leg, Stubborn or Moody. Have you ever wondered what nickname Jesus has for you?

*Patch Adams* is a movie based on the true story of a medical student who discovers the healing qualities of humor while treating patients. In one scene, the medical students are making their rounds in the hospital. Their teacher, a doctor who lacked a good bedside manner, would describe the symptoms and diagnoses of each patient without any feelings or sensitivity for the patient. As the teacher approaches one young woman with open sores on her feet and legs, he says: "Here we have a juvenile onset diabetic with poor circulation and evidence of gangrene. Any questions?"

The students start inquiring about the symptoms and discussing possible treatments. The patient cringes as she hears the frightening words offered by the students and a doctor who has not yet even acknowledged her presence. From the back of the room, Patch's voice is heard: "What's her name? I was just wondering what's the patient's name?" Caught off guard, the physician struggles to find a name on the chart before announcing: "Doris." As the class moves out of the room toward the next patient, Patch lingers at the woman's bedside and reaches out and touches her shoulder as he calls her by name. As the world around us fails to acknowledge our presence and who we are, Jesus as the Good Shepherd knows our name and reaches out to touch us in love, calling each of us by name.

The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is characterized by the shepherd who calls each of his sheep by name, and in turn, the sheep recognizing the shepherd's voice. Jesus tells us that the sheep follow the shepherd trusting the one who knows them by name. In contrast, the thieves and bandits are strangers. The sheep do not follow the stranger but will run from the stranger because they do not know his voice.

There's a blessed assurance in the shepherd-sheep relationship that Jesus describes here. So, during this season of Lent, we each need to examine our lives and our relationship with the Lord. Is Jesus truly our Shepherd? Do we listen for His voice? Do we hear our "name," and do we follow where Jesus leads us? Or have the "bandits and thieves" of this world stolen us away from the Shepherd? We must be careful not to let the strangers of this world lead us astray: strangers who mislead you with false information; strangers who try to steal our time; strangers who try to buy our attention with material possessions; and strangers who try to become our substitute for God.

A few years ago, the Methodist Church ran some TV commercials called Love Letters. In one of these, God says: "I miss our late-night conversations. I've tried calling you, but there is no answer." Can you hear God's voice calling you? God calls in the midst of our busy schedules, in the early morning, in the music we sing, in the people we encounter, in walks through our neighborhood, in much-needed vacations, in the ordinary moments of our lives, and especially in our quiet times with Him. When we listen, we find that God knows our name and shows us the way; He watches over us like a shepherd.

In verses 11-13, Jesus clearly demonstrates the difference between the Good Shepherd and the hired hand. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; however, the hired hand who does not own the sheep and is not interested in their well-being will run away when the wolf or danger approaches. He does not care or love the sheep as the Good Shepherd does. As our Good Shepherd, Jesus promises that He will go to any length to save us, even to the cross at Calvary.

The image of the shepherd going to great lengths to protect his flock would have resonated with Jesus' audience. Shepherds in ancient Palestine were well known for their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the flock's welfare. In the same way, Jesus nurtures and protects His flock. But where the ancient shepherd's motivation was one of survival, Jesus' sole motivation is out of love for each of us and a desire that we be reconciled with God.

John 3:16 reminds us that God so loved the world that He sent His only Begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him would be saved. Jesus came to reconcile us to God, to restore the broken relationship between God and His sheep. In verse 16 of our text, Jesus says that He has other sheep that are not yet in the fold, have not heard about Him or have not yet accepted Him as their Lord and Savior. He goes on to say that He must bring them into the fold so that there will be one flock and one shepherd. 2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God does not want anyone to perish. Someday, hopefully, everyone will know Him as the Good Shepherd.

I know that I have shared this illustration with you before, but it fits well with our topic this morning. In his book *A Gentle Thunder*, Max Lucado discusses the difference between a cowboy and a shepherd. Out here in the West, the cowboy is an American hero, like John Wayne or Clint Eastwood, while in the Bible the hero was a shepherd like Moses and David. On the surface they seem the same – both are rugged, tough, loners, live outdoors, and face constant danger. But this is where the similarities end. The shepherd loves the sheep; they are his pets. It's not that the cowboy doesn't appreciate the cows; it's just that he doesn't know the animal. He doesn't even want to. Have you ever seen a picture of a cowboy caressing a cow or carrying a calf like a shepherd does a lamb, except maybe in *City Slickers* when Billy Crystal was carrying Norman the newborn calf.

The cowboy leads the cows to slaughter; the shepherd leads the sheep to be sheared. The cowboy drives the cattle; the shepherd leads the sheep. The cowboy knows the names of the trail hands while the shepherd knows the names of all his sheep. The cowboy whoops and hollers at the cows; the shepherd calls each sheep by name.

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't call Himself the Good Cowboy? Because I don't know about you, but I need a shepherd. We don't need a cowboy to herd and yell at us; we need a shepherd to care for us and to guide us. And we have one; One who knows each of us by name. I don't

need to tell you how important that is. Like me, you probably have been in a situation where someone forgot your name. Perhaps you have been in a situation where no one knew who you were or even cared. Well, Jesus cares for all His sheep. He does not drive us or brand us; instead, He guides, feeds, and nurtures us. And word has it that He won't quit until we reach the homeland – heaven.

In our own unique journey through life, we can become so preoccupied with our own personal desires that we do not hear the voice of God calling our name or see the hand of God reaching out to us. It is said that the Eastern shepherd, as he brings the sheep back to the fold each night, stands at the gate and counts each one. As he does so, he puts his hand on the head of each animal. He makes a habit of touching each one of them. If he neglects this habit, the sheep may not respond to his voice and may wander away and get into danger.

In the same way, if we neglect to spend time alone with the Lord, we forget what His voice sounds like. Are you experiencing the Shepherd's touch each day? Are you spending time with Him each day? Do you recognize His voice when He calls you? As the Good Shepherd, the Lord wants to touch us each day. I don't know any of us who do not need to feel the touch of the Master. God would never have sent His Son into this world if we didn't need His love and care. So, let's face it friends, we are sheep and now more than ever before we need a shepherd. The Shepherd knows our name and He's calling us. Will you let Jesus become the Shepherd of your life? Listen for His voice and let the Good Shepherd touch you. I promise you that you will never regret it. Amen