

Church as the Flock of Christ
John 10: 1-21
Week 5

Opening

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Holy God, as we study Your Word and reflect on Your Church, we pray that the power of the Spirit would be at work to connect and renew us. Give us wisdom and insight and strengthen our bonds with one another and You. In the name of our risen Lord we pray, Amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

The image of Jesus as a Shepherd is a familiar one. You'll often see an idyllic picture of Jesus in lush pastures with His sheep (Psalm 23) painted on nursery walls or depicted in stain glass.

When you think of this image of Christ as the Good Shepherd, what memories, emotions, or thoughts arise for you? What about considering the church a flock of sheep? Does that have more positive or negative implications when you think about the comparison?

Read: John 10:1-21

**The Message translation is printed below or you can read from your own Bible

1-5 "Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."

6-10 Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep rustlers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only

there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

11-13 “I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He’s only in it for the money. The sheep don’t matter to him.

14-18 “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They’ll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd. This is why the Father loves me: because I freely lay down my life. And so I am free to take it up again. No one takes it from me. I lay it down of my own free will. I have the right to lay it down; I also have the right to take it up again. I received this authority personally from my Father.”

19-21 This kind of talk caused another split in the Jewish ranks. A lot of them were saying, “He’s crazy, a maniac—out of his head completely. Why bother listening to him?” But others weren’t so sure: “These aren’t the words of a crazy man. Can a ‘maniac’ open blind eyes?”

BACKGROUND

This passage is part of the larger “Shepherd Discourse,” in which Jesus addresses the Pharisees, who have just driven out of the synagogue a blind man whom Jesus had healed (John 9:34). Pastoral imagery is common in Jewish tradition, and the Pharisees would have understood themselves to be the “shepherds” of the Jewish people. Jesus casts them in the role of “thieves,” “bandits,” and “hired hands” (John 10:8, 12), because they have “taken” the relationship between God and Israel as their exclusive privilege and worked to protect their own position and interests. They are like the “bad shepherds” of Ezekiel 34:1-10.

In contrast Jesus is the Good Shepherd, as God is portrayed in Ezekiel 34:11. The Good Shepherd cares so much for the sheep that he is willing to lay down his life for them (John 10:11). This selfless attitude is based on his relationship with both the sheep and the Father (John 10:14-15). To “know” is to be in a close, intimate, loving relationship. Jesus’ love for God results in love for humanity, as our love for Jesus should result in love for others. Unlike the Pharisees who excluded the healed blind man from the community of faith, Jesus welcomes him (John 9:35-38), and in fact opens the gate (see John 10:9) to all. Verse 16 indicates that the “flock” extends beyond the “fold” of Israel. In other words, the relationship between God and humanity is not the exclusive privilege of one people, but the inclusive invitation to all. Inclusion in the community of faith is not based on heritage, race, nationality, gender, denomination, worship style, or any other label or characteristic. Inclusion in the community of faith is based on relationship with Jesus.

*If you have time, take a look at this video from Rev. Dr. Kenneth Bailey who grew up in Lebanon and describes the role of a Middle Eastern shepherd.
<http://www.tsm.edu/2020/09/16/the-good-shepherd-session-seven-the-rev-dr-kenneth-bailey/>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Initial Reactions

1. What from this passage confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? Perhaps hearing it read from a different translation caused you to notice a new word or phrase.
2. Were there stories or images you took away from Ryan's sermon on Sunday that helped you better understand this part of John's Gospel?

Diving Deeper

3. The primary distinction between the "hired hand" and the "good shepherd" is the selfishness of the former and the selflessness of the latter.
 - a. In what ways are churches and individuals more self-focused than other-focused?
 - b. What does it mean, or what might it look like, to "lay down our life" (to put aside our own desires, to give up time, to expend energy, to change priorities, etc.) for the benefit of others? How are we already doing this, and how could we do better?
 - c. How is our relationship with Jesus reflected in our relationship with others?
4. The "Shepherd Discourse" arises out of a discussion about blindness (see John 9:35-41), and in the discourse Jesus emphasizes that the sheep recognize his voice (John 10:3-5, 16), an experience different from sight.
 - a. How might we better recognize Jesus in others if we listened with our heart instead of judging by our sight?
 - b. What are some of the prejudices or triggers that immediately throw up barriers (such as race, political party, gender identity, education level, immigrant status, etc.), and how might we "listen" in other ways to move beyond those barriers and "see" the person behind them as a child of God?
 - c. What does it mean to listen to Jesus' voice (John 10:16)?
 - d. How do Jesus' words in John 10:16 relate to his words in Matthew 12:50?
5. Take a look at some of the pastoral imagery in the Hebrew Bible: Ezekiel 34; Psalms 23:1, 74:1, 79:13, 80:1, 95:7, 100:3.
 - a. Where do you hear the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures coming through in Jesus' words in John 10?
 - b. Where do you hear Jesus moving beyond the tradition and reinterpreting it?
6. Discuss the following quote and how it sounds to "our world." What people groups could we substitute for "the Gentiles"? How does thinking about others (whether enemies, unknowns, or disagreeables) as those "not yet brought into the sheepfold" change our perspective/attitude toward them?

- a. *The original “sheep” are the people of Israel. Jesus is calling them, and those from among his Jewish contemporaries who are ready for the call are hearing his voice, trusting him and coming to him. But, as Israel’s prophets and wise writers had always hinted, the God of Israel was never interested only in Israel. His call to Israel was for the sake of the whole world. The “other sheep” are that great company, from every nation under heaven that God intends to save, and to save through Jesus. The Jewish Messiah is to become the Lord, the shepherd, of the whole world...The Gentiles are no longer the enemy. They are sheep who have not yet been brought into the sheepfold. Take a moment to think through how this announcement must have sounded in a world – Jesus’ own world – filled with hatred and suspicion, with violence and counter-violence.¹*

The “so what?” Questions

7. After reading (and re-reading) this text, listening to the sermon, and discussing it with your COB, how might God be calling you to act or think differently (this can be as broad or narrow as you’d like)?

Closing

Check in if you haven’t already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary.

¹ (N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part One, Chapters 1-10*. Westminster John Knox Press, © 2002, 2004, pp. 152-153)