

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD
JOHN 10:1-18

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The funeral was held this past week for the former Prime Minister of Japan, Shinzo Abe. (PROJECTOR ON--- SHINZO ABE) Abe was the longest serving prime minister in Japan, having been in office for four terms. He retired two years ago for health reasons. He was campaigning for a fellow political party member a couple of months ago when he was assassinated.

The killer was upset because of Abe's ties to Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. Abe was not a member of the church. But he appears to have had ties to the organization. Last year he gave a video address to a group affiliated with the Moonies in which he praised the church for its family values. The Moonies have pursued relationships with him and other leaders in his political party.

The assassin's mother got involved with the Unification Church when he was just a child. Over the course of several years the mom was persuaded to give about \$800,000 to the Moonies. In the end the family was left in poverty. In a letter written the day before the assassination the shooter said that his mother's devotion to the church had "distorted my entire life." (*The Guardian*, 8/1/1022) While we can sympathize with his anger, we can't support his murderous behavior.

Like so many cults, the Unification Church began as the result of a supposed vision which Sun Myung Moon (SUN MYUNG MOON) had. As is true with many cults, he regarded the Bible as inspired. But the book which this Korean man wrote, *The Divine Principle*, is the text that followers were really supposed to follow.

Like so many cult leaders, he gathered a crowd to follow him. He got rich in the process. In the seventies and eighties his Moonies became known for selling flowers on street corners. People were also willing to allow Moon and other Unification Church leaders arrange marriages in giant ceremonies involving people who didn't previously know each other. This supposed servant of his flock somehow ended up with a net worth at the end of his life of \$900 million.

We humans can make pretty bad decisions in our choice of leaders. (PROJECTOR OFF) Most of Germany got behind Adolf Hitler before and during World War II. Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung had the support of millions of their countrymen. Surveys until recently showed that most Russians were supportive of Vladimir Putin's war efforts. Even Christians are duped into following leaders who act more like Hollywood celebrities than humble followers of Jesus. In our culture many follow only themselves. They pursue money and power and pleasure but give little thought to their own mortality and a coming reckoning with the God who made them. In this election season we are

reminded again about the importance of making wise choices of those who would be our political leaders.

We humans are often like sheep. We need good shepherds, or a good shepherd. Jesus recognized that need. In the passage before us this morning He claimed to be the Good Shepherd. We are going to look at this story to see what relevance it might have to our own lives.

A couple of weeks ago we began a survey of the parables of Jesus. Most of the parables are recorded in Luke and Matthew. First, we looked at the Parable of the Soils from Mark's Gospel. Last week we looked at the Parable of the Weeds, as it is described in Matthew's Gospel. Today I would like for us to consider one parable from John's Gospel. A number of the stories of Jesus recorded in John are included in commentaries on the parables of Jesus. But they are different than the parables recorded in the other three gospels.

The King James Version uses the word "parable" in v. 6 of our passage to describe this story. Actually the original Greek word is different from the words used for "parable" in the other gospels. Our English Standard Version translation uses the term "figure of speech" for the original word that appears in this verse. These figures of speech in John don't tell stories so much as they describe Jesus and His mission in figurative language. So we are going to see how the figurative language in our passage describes how Jesus meets our needs.

I.

Let's look at vv. 1-6 of John #10 and consider Roman numeral I in the outline on the back of the bulletin, RECOGNIZING THE TRUE SHEPHERD. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. RECOGNIZING THE TRUE SHEPHERD) The exact setting of the story is not provided for us. Chapter 9 describes the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem by Jesus. That healing provoked a confrontation with the Pharisees. If this story did not happen immediately after that, it must have been fairly soon. Clearly the author John saw a connection between that confrontation in the temple with the Pharisees and what Jesus said next.

In vv. 1-3 Jesus says, **"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. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out."** In the first century many towns and villages of Judea had community sheep corrals. They were large, fenced enclosures where shepherds from the town would bring their flocks in the evening after having watched them in the fields during the day. One person was appointed to watch the sheep during the night. In the morning the shepherds would show up for their sheep. They would call their sheep, and the sheep would gather around their particular shepherds, who would then lead them out to their pastures.

Jesus speaks of thieves and robbers who would try to steal the sheep during the night by getting into the sheepfold by some means other than by going through the door. Given the previous incident with the Pharisees, Jesus is probably describing that religious group. Most of the rabbis, the pastors of the Jewish synagogues, were Pharisees. The Pharisees were the legalists of the day. They were the guardians of tradition. They had taken the Hebrew Bible and added all kinds of rules to it, claiming in some cases that these additional rules were more important than the Bible itself.

Jesus, in effect, is charging that the Pharisees are not the real, legitimate shepherds of the flock. They are thieves. They are motivated by a desire for money, by a desire for power, and by a desire to maintain their positions and market share.

We know from history outside of the Bible that there were a number of rebel groups in this part of the world at this time that were trying to throw off the Romans. Some were motivated primarily by political reasons. Some were motivated by religious reasons. These kinds of people may also have been in Jesus' mind when He spoke of thieves and robbers who were trying to steal the sheep.

Today Jesus probably would have included leaders of cult groups within the category of thieves and robbers. I suspect that He would have included some of the TV evangelists who promise their viewers that if they give lots of money to them, they are sure to get even more in return. Perhaps he would have included even political leaders who argue that the solutions to the nation's greatest problems are primarily political rather than spiritual.

Jesus indicates that the one who enters by the door is the true shepherd. The true shepherd is clearly Jesus. But what is the door in this section of the passage? My interpretation is that it is the Old Testament, especially those passages that describe Israel's coming Messiah. The real Messiah, the genuine shepherd of the flock, would meet the qualifications laid down in the Old Testament. He would be born in Bethlehem. He would be a descendant of David. He would heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead. He would be the suffering servant, described in Isaiah 53.

What about the doorkeeper? My suspicion is that Jesus was referring to John the Baptist. The Old Testament prophet Malachi spoke about one who would prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. (JOHN 1:6-7) In #1 of John's Gospel the Apostle John wrote, **"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him."** Later in the same chapter John the Baptist saw Jesus and declared (JOHN 1:29), **"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** John the Baptist, I suspect, was the doorkeeper. He was the one who recognized the true shepherd of the flock.

In vv. 4-6 of our passage (PROJECTOR OFF) Jesus says, **"When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his**

voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.’ 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.” The true shepherd leads, and the true sheep will follow.

(SHEEP DRIVEN) In western countries sheep are usually driven. In the east sheep are led. (SHEPHERD LEADS) I have seen it myself in the West Bank of Israel among the Bedouin. **“When he puts forth all his own, Jesus says in v. 4, “he goes before them and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.”**

Tim Laniak (TIM LANIAK) went to high school with my wife. Tim participated in a discipleship group which I led one summer years ago. He went on to become a seminary professor. One year on a sabbatical he went to the country of Jordan to spend time with Bedouin shepherds. The ancient Bedouin shepherd culture is quickly dying out as another casualty of the modern life. But Tim was able to see some of those ancient traditions still at work.

He got close to one shepherd by the name of Abu Jamal. Abu started out in the Jordanian army. But when he got out in 1984, he decided that he wanted to be a shepherd. He began with one sheep and grew his flock to 2000 sheep. Abu knows every one by name. He says that he only ever lost one sheep, and that loss still haunts him today.

Abu has a number of hired workers, and he has two wives who live in two different homes. He could spend more time with them, but he still spends most of his time with the sheep. He told Tim that if he wasn't out there with the sheep every day, he wouldn't deserve to be their shepherd.

Abu also has several sons. But he says that they see his work as a business only. They don't belong out with the sheep. He says sadly that they don't have the heart of a shepherd. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Fortunately we have a shepherd who is always out with the sheep. He has promised to always be with us and to never forsake us. Jesus is the true shepherd. If we are really His sheep, we will follow Him. He guides and leads His flock. If we stay close to our shepherd, we don't have to worry about missing God's will for our lives. He will lead us. Our shepherd is always more interested in leading us than the sheep are in following Him. If we are truly interested in following Him, we can be sure that He will be with us and that He will guide us.

Many people, however, are prone to follow false shepherds. Sometimes those false shepherds see shepherding as primarily a business. They would rather not be out there with the sheep. They lack the heart of a shepherd. There are implications in this for us as churches and church leaders and individual Christians. If we want to lead people in a godly way, we have to be with them and we have to love them as a shepherd.

The main point is that we need to recognize that Jesus is our true shepherd. He laid down His life for the sheep. He died for our sins on the cross so that we could have eternal life by trusting in Him. When we have big messups in life, it is usually because we haven't been following Him closely enough. Perhaps we have been lured away by a false shepherd. The best way to avoid that is to spend time studying His word. When we do that consistently, we are most likely to recognize the voice of our true shepherd.

II.

In vv. 7-10 we come to the problem of FINDING THE DOOR. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. FINDING THE DOOR) John writes, **“So Jesus again said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.’”** In the previous section Jesus compared Himself to the true shepherd. Here He compares Himself to the door.

When the shepherd claims his sheep in the morning from the sheepfold, he leads them out to green pastures. There the sheep eat their nourishment. Out in the countryside there were rock enclosures that served as sheepfolds. (SHEEPFOLD ISRAEL) The walls often weren't as high as the ones in town. The enclosure wasn't as large. But such are some of the sheepfolds which are still found in Israel today. (SHEEPFOLD ISRAEL 2) Some of the sheepfolds were connected with caves like this. Sheep could lay inside and sleep if they liked. Or they might choose to continue grazing outside. If the pasture was far from home, the shepherd and his flock would bed down here for the night. Perhaps it was in such a setting that the shepherds were watching their flocks on Christmas Eve.

The only entrance to this sheepfold is in the foreground. Obviously there is no gate. So at night the shepherd, or shepherds, would lay down in the doorway. The shepherd became the door. The only way into the sheepfold was to go through, or by, him.

The Pharisees and Sadducees and revolutionaries claimed to be the door into the true sheepfold. If you really wanted to be part of what God was doing, you had to enter through them. Jesus said that He was the door. There is only one entrance into these sheepfolds. Jesus claimed to be the only door. Four chapters later He would declare, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me.”** (John 14:6) (PROJECTOR OFF)

Why was Jesus so narrow-minded? Because truth is narrow-minded. Just as there are physical laws that are unchanging, so also there are spiritual laws that are unchanging. If you jump off a cliff, you will have to deal with the laws of gravity. If you want to drive without fear of going to jail in Nevada, you have to go through the DMV. If you want to be connected with the God who is really there, you have to go through Jesus Christ.

The result of dealing with Jesus is finding pasture. We find nourishment for our souls. We find truth and security and meaning in life. As long as we stay within the boundaries

established by our shepherd, we can go in and out. We can enjoy peace and security and a measure of freedom.

Life doesn't always make sense. We deal with a couple of persistent health challenges in our family. Some of you also have health challenges. Others of you have financial challenges and relationship challenges and job challenges. All of us are dealing with economic challenges. What keeps me sane and straightened out in the midst of these challenges is the confidence that Jesus is shepherding my family. We don't always know what is going on. But we are confident that He does, and that He will meet our needs until we reach our ultimate home.

In v. 10 Jesus says, **“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** There are thieves around who have a selfish interest in the flock. They are not concerned about the sheep themselves. They are concerned about their own needs. They are interested in using the sheep to meet their own agenda, to give them power or money or security. These thieves promise the good life. They promise pleasure and money and success and power and freedom. But in the long run they don't deliver.

Jesus Christ does deliver. He is the door to the abundant life. He provides meaning and purpose and security and significance and ultimately eternal life.

III.

Finally, in vv. 11-18 we learn about FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. FOLLOWING THE GOOD SHEPHERD) Jesus describes Himself as the true shepherd, the door, and now the good shepherd. In vv. 11-15 we read, **“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.”**

The earliest discovered pictures of Jesus are found in the catacombs of Rome. (PROJECTOR ON--- JESUS AND CATACOMBS) This one comes from the early second century. If you can't quite make it out, Jesus has a lamb on his shoulders and around his neck. He is portrayed as the good shepherd. His role as the good shepherd is also a central theme of many of the earliest hymns. (PROJECTOR OFF)

What is so attractive about this aspect of Jesus? It is this picture of His care for His followers. The good shepherd holds the promise of providing food for His flock, protecting the sheep from enemies, and guiding them into safe pastures.

The thing that is unique about this shepherd is that He lays down His life for the sheep. Normally the sheep are used for sacrifices in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. But here the shepherd claims to be the sacrifice. The reference, of course, is to the crucifixion.

Normally the death of a shepherd would mean disaster for the sheep. The flock would be in danger of scattering and would be vulnerable to enemies. Indeed, after Jesus died, His followers seemed to be in disarray. But then Jesus rose from the dead. Later He also provided His followers with the Holy Spirit. Most importantly the death of Jesus secured eternal life for His followers.

Jesus contrasts the behavior of the good shepherd with that of hired hands. By the very nature of the arrangement a hired hand is motivated by a desire for pay from the owner of the flock. He doesn't own the sheep. They don't really belong to him. So when danger threatens, his inclination is to flee. He is not willing to risk his life for sheep that don't belong to him. Indeed a body of early Jewish writings called the Mishnah said that a hired shepherd was bound to defend a flock from an attack by one wolf. But if more than one wolf attacked the flock, he was relieved of responsibility for the death of the sheep.

In the original context of this parable, this extended figure of speech, Jesus is implying that the Pharisees are not genuine shepherds. Their care for the people of Israel is limited. When their own personal interests are threatened, they won't fight for the sheep. Jesus, however, indicates that He will lay down His life for them.

In vv. 16-18 He speaks of other sheep who are not of this fold. The reference seems to be to Gentiles. Before long Gentiles will be made part of His fold. Christ's church would ultimately be comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

In v. 17 Jesus makes the third reference in this passage to dying for the sheep: **"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again."** This time He claims that He has authority to take it back again. In v. 18 He adds, **"No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."**

Jesus is not a victim of circumstances beyond His control. The crucifixion is part of God's plan. It is part of Jesus' plan. So is the resurrection. Most New Testament passages speak of God raising Jesus from the dead, referring to God the Father. But here Christ claims a role in that resurrection as well. He has authority to take up His life again. Thus this good shepherd is worthy to be followed.

He is also worthy to be emulated. The leaders of a local church have a special responsibility to follow His example of shepherding. In the first four verses of #5 in 1 Peter (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 5:1-2) the apostle writes, **"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as**

God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; (1 PETER 5:3-4) not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory..”

Jesus Christ in His role as shepherd is a model for pastors, leaders of Christian organizations, elders, lay leaders, and chaplains. All of us in these positions are called to be shepherds. The danger in working with sheep is that there may be frustration. (PROJECTOR OFF) Sheep are prone to wander off. They don't always follow the lead of the shepherds. They don't always eat what they should. They aren't as committed to the program as the shepherds might like them to be.

The temptation then becomes to drive the sheep. Instead of leading them we begin to drive them. We yell at them. We get angry at them. We coerce them. We manipulate them. We load them down with guilt. We complain about them.

If that doesn't produce the response that we desire, we may be tempted to start sniping at the other shepherds. We get upset with them for not having the same attitude toward the sheep that we have. Those other shepherds just don't recognize how disobedient and resistant the sheep are. Those other shepherds are part of the problem, perhaps.

Then we start getting angry with the chief shepherd. We tell him that we don't like the flock that He gave us. We demand a new flock.

Fortunately the good shepherd is not like that toward us. Remember His original flock? The first disciples were really slow to catch on to the program. They were slow to understand. They were weak in faith. When Jesus' own time of crisis came at the arrest and crucifixion, His sheep deserted Him. Peter denied that He even knew the shepherd. Judas betrayed Jesus. The rest went into hiding. When He went to the cross, the loudest voices were those of the mockers.

But still Jesus didn't reject His flock. He laid down His life for the sheep, so that they--- so that we--- might have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Thus He invites us to become part of His flock, by trusting in Him. He wants us to keep following Him, and He doesn't give up on us. For He is the Good Shepherd.

If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Good Shepherd, you can do that simply by putting your trust in Him. The Bible says that we must acknowledge that we are sinners separated from a holy God by our sin. We must recognize that Jesus was God who became man and that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. Our one responsibility is to put our trust in this Jesus who also rose from the dead. We must welcome Him into our lives.

We will close with this prayer from Hebrews #13 vv. 20 and 21 (PROJECTOR ON--- HEBREWS 13:20): **“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, (HEBREWS 13:21) equip you with everything good that you may do his**

will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”