

Good and gracious God, calm our minds, quiet our thoughts. Open us to your word and guide us toward your purposes. May your Spirit enable us to hear your voice that calls us to ever be your faithful people. Amen.

Faith: A Community Endeavor, Part 2

John 10:1-10
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A. Jesus as Shepherd

In 1940 Warner Sallman painted a picture of Jesus—“Head of Christ.” This work became extraordinarily popular and apparently still is as by the end of the 20th C it was reproduced over ½ Billion times. You know the picture I’m talking about—handsome, well-coifed Jesus, neat beard, clean clothes, no flaw. Now Sallman didn’t stop there. He painted others that are quite familiar-- knocking at the door (with no handle), praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and of course the one on the cover of the bulletin—a serene Jesus lovingly holding the cute baby lamb. Somewhere in every church around—especially those from the 50’s, had or has at least one of these. We are no exception—praying in the Garden is in the hallway right outside the sanctuary.

At First Presbyterian Church, Hoxie, We had the Jesus holding the lamb picture. It hung in the elementary classroom in the finished church basement above the floor furnace. I saw a lot that picture because I liked standing in front of the furnace to get warm. It is a pleasant picture—easy on the eyes—and one I’m sure was placed there to be comforting to children.

But John in writing his gospel account, had something completely different in mind when he uses the image of the Shepherd. The church at that time was struggling to hold on in spite of the opposition from the Temple leaders, from the threat of charlatans preaching another

gospel, from the naysayers. The placement of this story is important. It comes right after the story of the healing of the blind man whom the Pharisees threw out of the Temple after being healed by Jesus. Jesus warns of thieves and robbers who come to misguide, intimidate, even steal the sheep (that is the believers). The use of image of the Shepherd was intended to inspire and encourage the people to hold strong to their faith in difficult times—to not be misled—to keep within the sound of the Shepherd’s voice. The Shepherd image conveys the assurance that Jesus stood firm, not discouraged by danger, not intimidated by threats to protect and guide his sheep because of his love for them.

John writes encouraging words—“don’t listen to voices of despair. Let nothing deter you from moving forward in accomplishing the mission and ministry before us”. Since Jesus is the Good Shepherd as John tells us, then discipleship means being sheep who find their life and well-being in his care. Jesus calls his own by name; that is, Jesus call us into community. His sheep follow him because they know his voice and so together we keep discerning where Jesus would have us go. “I know my sheep and they know me”. That is our assurance that together we are made stronger and grow in faith as we share our stories that point to the risen Christ and the life abundant we have through him.

Over the years through sermons, commentaries and books on this passage, the difficulty of shepherding sheep always seems to come up.

- Sheep aren’t intelligent—they are not known to be smart or cunning when it comes to their safety and well-being.
- They tend to wander away and are susceptible to threats.
- Sheep are directionless—they get lost easily.
- They are often restless when they are hungry and they need plenty of water.

- Sheep even need help in getting up if they fall down as it is so difficult for them.

And Jesus calls US sheep! I don't know if we should be insulted or accept that indeed we are like sheep. If we are honest, then there is a similarity. Compared to the wisdom of God, our intelligence is lacking. We too tend to wander away from God as we are lured by the call of the culture and our own busyness. We also can easily get lost in our faith journey and try to go our own way. We get restless, spiritually hungry and thirsty when we get out of touch with God. When we fall because of our choices or life circumstances—we do need help to get back up and move forward again.

So...it seems Jesus was on target—perhaps we are sheep. Take heart, it is not as bad as it would seem. The astounding and good news is that sheep are the prized possession of the Shepherd—we are the prized possession of Jesus who knows and calls us by name, who cares for us, and who laid down his life for us.

In seminary in one of the practice of ministry classes I took we had to read a book that illustrated the various aspects of ministry and pastoral care through selected imagery. One of those was Shepherd—the role of a pastor as shepherd of a congregation—an image I am not totally comfortable with on some levels. I assure you—I have never, ever thought of you as sheep! If you interpret the term as one who models or assists others in discerning Jesus' voice from all others that might distract us and one helping to keep Jesus' vision of the Kingdom always in mind as we work play and care for one another—then I am willing to claim that role.

I hope that I have done that in our time together by identifying the unique gifts and ministry passions of this church family, providing encouragement and support to live into those passions, helping to

sustain the vision, finding creative responses to challenges and nurturing as we continue to grow together as a family of faith.

In looking back, together we have followed the Shepherd and accomplished a lot for the Kingdom: providing food for the hungry through 2 Stop Hunger Now events, donations to the food pantry, Crop Walk support; outreach to the least and the lost through packing personal hygiene bags for homeless students, Christmas gifts for children through the Angel Tree program, gathering underwear for Twin City, school supplies for Anson Jones and Still Creek, building homes for Habitat, gifts of time and money for ramps to homes and PET carts and a whole host of ministries.

It doesn't stop there—thousands and thousands of dollars donated to support ministries within the community and beyond. Mission outreach in Mexico, Guatemala and Peru. We assembled buckets with cleaning supplies and health/hygiene bags for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance to be used in areas of devastation such as when Katrina and Ike hit land. We even helped Katrina victims that were transported to BCS for safety.

In the passion for caring for those in the family of faith we have come together to pray, provide homebound communion, visitation, meals, support in times of crisis, and of course... many opportunities of fellowship. We have stepped out to explore various expressions of worship to enrich our lives and our praise to God. We have welcomed others into our space to celebrate worship in their traditions such as Congregation Beth Shalom and the Korean Student church. Then there are all the efforts/passions you serve beyond the church because of the encouragement you receive from the community of faith. What an amazing journey!!!

B. Wandering

But just like sheep—we can lose sight of the Good Shepherd’s voice and become caught up in secular anxieties. We have danced on occasion with the temptation to define goals and success in quantitative terms using the same standards we use to measure progress in other areas of our lives—things like membership and budget statistics. While they are measurable they do not tell the whole story. Paul, who planted many faith communities never defined growth in numerical terms because communities grow in other ways. The church, as Paul understands, is always under construction—and how well we here at FPC know that – literally and figuratively. In 14 years together we have seen the construction of the Fellowship Hall and Carter Creek Foyer area, the renovation of the chancel area, the parlor uplift, sanctuary refurbishing and the replacement of the HVAC—hot, dirty, dusty, noisy times. We have studied who we are and how we do church through efforts like Acts 16:5, the 5 Fruitful Practices and other visioning processes and found ways to better do what we do best—being community.

Paul’s understanding of growth is growing in ways of responding to our world in counter-cultural Christ like ways to the challenges that confront us and growing in ways to represent Christ and the work of Christ in the community and beyond. While Paul undoubtedly hoped for the church to grow numerically—his greater concern was for the spiritual formation of the people. His focus was and is always inviting, welcoming people to the ministry of J.C. so that together the church grows in faith and service. Spiritual formation for Paul is being continually shaped by the story of the crucified Christ, growing in Christ, and holding the values of Christ and not the world.

So for Paul the vision, the mission of the church is not about numbers or objectifying certain age groups as the end all be all of church, or

welcoming others into the community to fill a quota. Rather it is to travel together on this journey of faith learning from each other. The community consistently recalls the stories of Christ who gave himself for others and this in turn shapes the imagination, the vision, and the outreach leading to a transformed way of being in the world. The church is a place for an authentic experience of God through the shared stories, worship, sermons, hymns, classroom instruction, prayers, empathy, compassion and encouragement. It is the place to experience God's grace.

As Paul wrote to the Philippians: The God who began a good work among you will bring it to completion—the church will survive. The community of faith is united not by family, or economic, or educational ties, but by our common faith and loyalty to Christ—the Shepherd who calls us by name to follow and to share in his work.

This church may not look like what it was 15, 20, 30 or more years ago, but the reality is that no church does. If it does, then it is dying. Just like the world continues to grow and evolve, the church is called to do the same, to take lessons from the past, to discern a way to continually move forward, to be Christ in the world. When the church does this it is a thriving place. This community of faith is not the same as the one I encountered 14 years ago when I came to serve as your Associate Pastor. Yes, the numbers, the building, many of the people, programs are different because this church is very much thriving, growing, evolving. I mentioned previously all the ways we have been stretched to continually hear and respond to the one who calls us by name. At times it has been painful, uncomfortable, but we have persevered and thrived. Do not lose sight of the new ways God is calling us to be church. We will continue to discern, we will continue to hear and respond, we will continue to thrive as a community of faith where God is experienced.

You and I have more unfinished business in our journeys. The Shepherd calls us to keep moving forward with enthusiasm, hope, purpose, and commitment to Christ. Like Paul, then we can boast that the race we have run in this time of being community together was not in vain. Our labor, our accomplishments, even our failures were not in vain. We have shared a journey of growth and service with the Lord helping others to claim an experience of life in Christ. Because of our experiences together we will continue to live, even on our new paths with that faith and hope of all the possibilities and promises that God holds in store for us. I give thanks for this community of faith who continually lives out of your abundance of faith and the commitment to make a difference through serving and loving others in response to the Shepherd's call.

To God Be the Glory!!