

I AM the Door
John 10:1-10
1 Peter 2:19-25

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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John 10:1-10

‘Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.’

1 Peter 2:19-25

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Previously on “I AM,” Jesus has explained that he is the Bread of Life, the way that we can get abundant, eternal life, starting not after we’re dead, but right now. Jesus also explained that he is the Light of the World, letting us see the beautiful image of God in each of our sisters and brothers.

The Gospel passage this morning comes immediately after the healing of a blind man. The blind man said, very loudly and very publicly, that Jesus must have been sent by God, to be able to do things like that. This made the Pharisees, ... concerned and confused. Jesus doesn’t

live in Bethlehem, and he heals on the Sabbath. These are signs that he is not exactly the Messiah whom they are expecting.¹

Jesus uses a metaphor that would have made sense to the people who directly heard him, but that doesn't make nearly as much sense to us today in our modern suburbs.

In those days, shepherds would sometimes herd their sheep into a communal pen for safety at night. There was a guard at the gate, to make sure that only authorized shepherds could enter. When it was time to leave in the morning, a shepherd would walk in and call his sheep. His sheep would know his voice, and they would come. The others would ignore him.

A more familiar, if limited, metaphor would have to do with our cars. When I walk into a parking lot, I hit the button on the remote fob on my keys, and my car beeps and the headlights flash. If I hit the wrong button, my car's horn starts beeping loudly and the lights start flashing, and my car becomes a spectacle that annoys everyone within earshot. Some people's cars will even start the ignition in response to the remote fob. In any case, all the other cars do nothing, because that fob does not have anything to do with them.

This is a more limited metaphor, because the car and the fob came together from the factory. They were made to go together. The sheep and the shepherd have learned to be in relationship.

In the children's book *The Little Prince*,² the little boy of the title meets a fox, and the fox asks him to tame it. The fox explains to the boy that the process of taming something is what

¹ Jesus was born in Bethlehem; this is apparently not a well-known fact at the time.

² Saint-Exupéry Antoine de, and Harcourt, Brace & World. 1943. *The Little Prince*. Translated by Katherine Woods. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

makes each one unique to the other. It is what makes this fox unique to the boy among all the other foxes, and what makes the boy unique to the fox among all the other boys in the universe.

In order to do that, they form a friendship. They spend time together, getting used to each other's presence. They do things together. They develop routines and rites together. Over time, they come to expect each other and they miss each other when they're apart. The fox explains to the boy that, "If you come [each day] at four in the afternoon, I'll begin to be happy by three."

The fox teaches the boy that, "One sees clearly only with the heart. Anything essential is invisible to the eyes." and that "You become responsible forever for what you've tamed."³

This story shows the difference between the sheep and their shepherd on the one hand and my car and its fob on the other. The car and the fob were built already related to each other.

The sheep were born needing a shepherd, but not in relationship with one. That relationship between sheep and shepherd develops over time spent together.

When the shepherd calls his sheep, there is mutual recognition here. The shepherd has tamed the sheep by spending time with them and doing things together. They have become unique to each other. His is the only voice that they will follow, and he is responsible for them.

My car doesn't work that way. Anyone who has the fob can unlock my car and drive it away, relying on factory-installed blind obedience.

With living creatures, there is a difference between responding to someone in mutual relationship and responding in blind obedience. Blind obedience is based on positional authority or on a threat of force. This is true whether the one demanding obedience is a robber with a literal gun to someone's head, or a boss implicitly threatening to fire someone. Obedience is

³ *The Little Prince*. pp. 63-64.

demanded instantly, and it happens not out of relationship, but out of the fear of the consequences of disobedience.

Some people call blind obedience a virtue, but truly it robs the person of their personhood, their free will, love and trust. Sometimes, with little kids, you must settle for obedience, because they do not yet understand and because you have not yet built that relationship up to that point. But that does not mean that you're not working to develop that relationship.

God gave us human beings free will, and God does not want us to put that aside to just obey blindly. To obey anyone blindly. We were not born like the car with the fob, instantly responding in blind obedience to God's every thought. If God had wanted us to be like that, God could have made us like that. Legend says that the angels are like that, perfectly expressing God's will, because they do not have any real will of their own.

No, God wants to be in relationship with us. God wants to spend time with us, and to tame us. Jesus explains to those who are asking him questions that he is the shepherd, and the sheep know him. They respond to his voice, not because they don't have a choice or because they are afraid of his power, but because they are in that loving relationship.

One of the insights we discussed last week in the Wednesday night class was that the synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – tend to be about what Jesus wants us to DO.

They are where you find the Sermon on the Mount, with the Golden Rule and Jesus' famous admonition to love your enemies.⁴

John, on the other hand, is about WHY. It is about the relationship that God wants to have with God's people. John explains in the next-to-last chapter⁵ that he wrote all these things down so that the people who read them would come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing in him, you would have eternal life.⁶ John wrote his Gospel to invite all who read it into relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

God does not want six billion robots, obeying every command with robotic precision. God is not even willing to settle for that. If God wanted that, god would have created exactly that. God wants something far better than that. God wants to be in a real relationship with you.

What this means for us this week is this. Work to build your relationship with God. Intentionally spend time with God. If you can, spend time with God at the same time each day. Read the Bible. You can get the Bible on your phone now, if you don't want to carry a book around. Pray.

This will take time.

Like any other real relationship, it may change you.

You will have less time for some other things in your life.

But I suspect you'll find that, like the fox, if you do this every day at four in the afternoon, you'll begin to be happy by three.

Thanks be to God.

⁴ Matthew 5-7.

⁵ Yes, I'm giving you spoilers. "Spoilers, Sweetie."

⁶ John 20:31. Yes, I know that we do not know who wrote down the Gospel of John; that point is academic and secondary to what the book says and why it says it.

AMEN