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First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
October 21, 2018
"Whose are You?"
John 10: 1-18

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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

11 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹²The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

I was thrilled the other night to receive my results from a prominent DNA ancestry site. You know the ones where you send in a sample of personal DNA and they analyze it to determine your lineage back to the countries your people

originated from. You can then link into your family tree and maybe discover ancestors you never knew you had, and connect with cousins all over.

I think we all might harbor secret dreams of being descended from nobility or celebrity. But I have to confess that my results came back rather ordinary and with no surprises. Pretty much 100% Scandinavian here, yah sure! You betcha!

But after reading today's text in light of the DNA results, it got me to wondering about this question. To whom do you belong? Or whose are you? It's kind of fun to think about belonging to our ancestors and hearing the stories of the Old Country, isn't it? To recall stories of the Scandinavian farmers, sailors, and fisherman that braved an ocean passage to cross the Atlantic to forge a hardscrabble life on the prairies of America. To have siblings who have gone back to Norway and stood on the historical family farm and seen the original 19th century farm house. To hear stories of my entrepreneurial grandpa and uncles that purchased a threshing machine and hired themselves out as a crew all over our county to make extra money for their family. To hear the family stories and legends that have been passed down from generation.

It's good to know who you belong to. It's good to know who your people are. It's good to claim those people and for you to claim them. So when we begin to scratch beneath the surface of today's parable we're getting to this same fundamental question – Jesus is asking whose are you? Are you his? Or do you belong to somebody else?

Because if we are honest with ourselves, not all of the identities we claim are healthy. It's possible to belong to something that isn't positive, it's not uplifting, it's not edifying, and it's certainly not Jesus. I believe that, during this season of stewardship, it's vitally important that we ask ourselves to who and what do we belong? And to set aside those things that distract from our calling to belong to Jesus.

Take for instance politics. Our country is really struggling with this right now. We've mistaken our political identities as our primary identities. We wear the terms liberal or conservative like badges that we've allowed to define us. We've made of one party or the other like a tribe that warehouses who we are. Suddenly a victory by one side or the other becomes a referendum on our identities and politics becomes a win or lose, winner take all event. Instead of

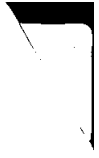
striving to work towards a common shared set of values that we all can rally around and compromise to achieve. We've become fractionalized, divided, and divisive. Why? Because we've confused our primary identity with our political identity.

Jesus says, ³"The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." Jesus is the gatekeeper. He calls us by name and we hear his voice and follow him. Those other voices are distractions.

The interesting thing about this is that it is thought that in ancient days, a group of farmers would work together to construct a common sheep pen. It would have high and sturdy walls and maybe even a covering of logs and thatch. It would have only one gated entrance. And in this large enclosure, not just one shepherd's sheep would be kept, but many.

The shepherd, who spent hours and days throughout the year with his herd, knew each sheep, and they knew his voice. Apparently all he had to do was to open the gate, speak to call them by name and the whole flock would follow him. All of the other sheep, who belonged to other shepherds, would hear the sound of a strange shepherd and refuse to leave the pen. It's just as Jesus says in the parable, ⁴"When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

I love this idea of hearing a voice and knowing it, loving it, and following it. It's sort of like when you get a call from a family member. Now, long before the days of caller ID, you would get a call from somebody you loved, and you'd pick up a call not knowing who it was on the other line until you heard their voice. I can still remember being away at college and getting a call from Mom or Dad or somebody in the family. You didn't even need them to identify themselves, you knew the sound of their voice immediately. Why? Because you knew them, you trusted them, you loved them. The bedrock of the relationship was deep and strong, and you delighted to hear their voice. And there will be some voices you'll never forget for these reasons. My Grandmother has been gone 24 years, but I can still hear the sound of her voice, and keep its memory close to my heart.



There's this beautiful story in the Gospel of John chapter 20. It's Sunday morning after Jesus died on the cross. Mary Magdalene goes before dawn to the Jesus tomb only to find it empty. She runs to get the disciples to tell them, and they see, and marvel and end up leaving her standing there alone in the early morning dawn weeping because she's not sure what's happening. When suddenly a person appears to her in the garden and, ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' "

Mary recognizes Jesus when she hears the unmistakable sound of his voice. All of the history of their life together, of her following him for years, of his great love for her, come flooding back in an instance. She recognizes him, and calls him Rabbi!

In the parable Jesus calls himself, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (v 11) "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." (v 3) And, "the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." (vv 4-5).

So again, I ask you this stewardship question: Whose are you? Do you recognize the voice of Jesus, hear him calling, and follow him out? Because we can follow plenty of other voices that aren't Jesus. They aren't our primary identity. They will lead us astray. They aren't healthy. They are the strangers. They aren't the voices of those who bring light, life, or salvation.

Some of these competing voices may seem to be rather benign. They ring, buzz, and vibrate for our attention during classes, and at dinner time. The notifications for texts, tweets, and Facebook likes captivate us. The premiere of our favorite actor's new show commands our schedule. We find ourselves getting lost in a Netflix binge that devours our summer afternoon. We find ourselves fixating on that new product that we're sure will make us just a bit happier, better looking, more stylish, or more prestigious. Or the divisive voices of politics that we considered earlier.

Or there are even far more insidious voices that can command our attention. Voices that wear the names of classic sins and human foibles: selfishness, greed, sloth, gluttony, licentiousness, and so on.

The point being, if we're really brutally honest with ourselves, and even though we're loathe to call ourselves sheep, we are all following the voices of false gods in our lives. Thieves and bandits, Jesus calls them, who have clambered into the sheep pen to steal us away from the Good Shepherd and take our lives for themselves.

And lets be honest: none of those false shepherds – those competing voices – those thieves and bandits are good. There is only one Shepherd who is truly good, and that is Jesus. Jesus tells us, “⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

11 ‘I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’”

Jesus is the one who comes that we may have life and have it abundantly. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

This is where our stewardship consideration comes into play. Think about this for a moment. The universe is God's. This earth is God's. All that is in the earth and on the earth is God's. We are God's, and all of our possessions and money and good things are God's. We literally belong to God. So, Jesus is asking us this morning, do we see the simple truth that we are his, he is our Good Shepherd, and he is calling us to be his flock?

And if so, our stewardship response, is this: If I am yours Jesus, if I am a sheep of your pasture. I'm a lamb of your flock. I chose to follow you. I will go where you lead me. I will do what you ask of me. I will love you as you have loved me. I will love my neighbor as you have commanded me.

May it be so.

Alleluia and Amen.