

Easter 4 John 10 “Say Again?” May 3 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Say again? We ask when we don't quite understand what someone has said to us. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus tells a parable to the Pharisees, the same Pharisees that He has just gotten through describing as either blind or guilty. He tells of a robber, a shepherd, a gatekeeper and the sheep. But they did not understand what He was saying to them.

So, Jesus said again to them, and to us: I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers come to steal and destroy. The sheep do not listen to their voices. I am the door to salvation and the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep. I know my sheep and they know me.

Still, many of them did not understand. And many of them said that He was insane.

But there are several things that we can understand. First, in John, chapter 10, Jesus refers to Himself 3 times as the door, 3 times as the Good Shepherd and 3 times as the One who lays down His life for the sheep. So, we should understand that those things are important ideas that He is trying to convey to us.

Now, as far as the door and the Good Shepherd, Jesus seems to use two different images here. But the second paragraph is not really an explanation of the first, but it seems to be a separate attempt to communicate the same “point.” The real question is the identification of the “point” which lies at the center of both illustrations: Jesus as a properly authorized shepherd and Jesus as a door.

Jesus is making an exclusive claim. Jesus is saying that he alone is the way, the truth, and the life. In other words, He alone is the door to heaven. This is in concord with Peter's statement in Acts in which he says that no other name under heaven is given by which we may be saved.

Not only that, but Jesus is giving us a metaphor, a “character” description of who He is in relation to us... a Good Shepherd. Such a characterization should confer the idea to us that he is patient with us, that He cares for us, and that He is there to protect us from harm.

These are things that make His exclusive claim as the door to salvation, the One and Only Way, much more comforting. A door can be cold, hard, and built to keep one out in the cold rather than in, where it is safe and warm. He is more than that, different, in that He loves us in a self-sacrificing and tender way.

And I think Jesus meant the door thing much more literally than we usually think. A shepherd would often have an enclosure in which the sheep were kept and the he would sleep across the entrance. He literally was the door! Jesus is the faithful and good door. The sheep pass in and out in safety under his watchful gaze. Those who seek the sheep through any other means are thieves and scoundrels who mean the sheep no good. They come to kill and destroy the flock. Jesus is the Good Shepherd at the door; He is watching out for you and me.

Next, we should ask ourselves just who is this thief and robber? What does it mean that this thief and robber comes to kill and destroy? Is this what happens when someone defines life by something other than the relationship with Christ in which God saves us from sin, death and devil? Is the thief the therapist who tells us that if we just let go of our guilt then we can really be happy? Is the robber the little voice in our own heads that tell us that we will be happy if we just acquire more stuff? Is the one who takes and destroys life the one who gets us to focus so exclusively on our own selves that we forget about God completely?

Or is it even simpler than that. Is the thief simply the person who gives us the most? Oprah Winfrey used to give millions of dollars away, she looks benevolent and life-saving, but is she? Oh, I am not saying she isn't! I can't see into her heart, and certainly, even if it is not a "Christ motivated" event, Jesus can use even the pagans to do good deeds. But in the final analysis, it is the relationship with Christ in which life is given. Does the gift lead to that? If it doesn't and if it distracts from that faith relationship, then that **is** the definition of thievery.

In any case, the disciples did not get it, so Jesus tried again. He just doesn't give up on them or on us because we are dense. I am very glad of that.

Now the "sheep thing is a little easier, albeit somewhat more painful, to understand. We are sheep. That is not bad, but it does tell some things about us. For one thing, we don't see very well. So we sometimes miss the danger that is right in front of us. We have serious limitations on our ability to discern.

We also can be rendered helpless rather quickly. We are dependent upon the caring love of a shepherd or we may die from a multitude of afflictions. Like sheep, we wander from the rich grass of God's word. We seek the excitement of sin's turbulent waters. And like most sheep, we get lost one blade of grass at a time, nibbling our way to isolation from God and vulnerability to our enemies. We sheep of God's fold do not live in a vacuum. There are those who crawl over the wall of our sheep pen to do us evil and lead us to danger and death.

You see, there are not multiple paths to the safety of our heavenly home. As much as our culture would like us to think that everything is relative and we can be eclectic in our beliefs and religion, the truth is that there are right and wrongs here. And the wrongs can have terrible and eternal consequences.

So, for many of us this raises the question, "How do we recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd, Jesus? If he is so important to us, how can we know that we are listening to His voice? What if He comes and speaks and we miss it? What of the unbaptized or the baptized who have not darkened the door of church for years. How do they recognize the voice? This is the work of the Spirit, but he often uses people, sometimes even preachers.

I wonder what image Jesus would use if he were walking the technological, educational, occupational, and political paths which our people are walking today? After all, few of us are farmers who have much experience with sheep. Can we imagine how Jesus would express this to those of us today, who may have never seen a sheep? Here are a few thoughts. Instead of "I am the door" or "I am the Good Shepherd," how about:

- I am the operating system of our computer;
- I am the Virus Protection software; (Mine surely is not very effective sometimes, but then again Jesus also spoke of less than effective shepherds)
- I am the firewall who stands between you and the world of malware and spyware which are trying to rob, steal from, and devour you;
- I am the global positioning system – you are never lost when I am with you;
- I am your social security – in your day of weakness I am there for you;

- I am the teacher, who enlightens your ignorance and takes care of your needs, who, when the intruder threatens, gets you to safety, who in a disaster seeks you out, counting heads and looking for faces to make sure that everyone gets out;

Now that's closer.

This is important, you see. The person who walks through our doors from the larger culture and hears us speaking of shepherds and sheep may or may not think we are insane, but even if they can understand the metaphor, does it actually speak to them? Does it touch their hearts anymore? I don't know. But we, as witnesses, must find a way to do that...something in our everyday lives that compares with the love with which Jesus loves us, protects us, sacrifices for us, and redeems us. Metaphors are important tools of that process. Or sometimes simple words come closest to the idea; as in "God shows us His love in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

But be assured we can, indeed, hear Jesus' voice; it's why we are here today. We have been baptized, we commune at this altar, and we are part of His community, sheep of His pasture, watered and fed with His Word and Sacraments. And He searches us out again and again.

Our Good Shepherd **has** risen from the dead and He cares for the sheep. They are precious to him. His gentle care is not just a "last day" sort of thing, but an everyday sort of thing. Sheep need this care, and in Jesus Christ they find this care.

Our inability to see this is compensated by the fact that Our Good Shepherd uses the senses which we do have. He comes to us again and again. Our Good Shepherd calls into our ears with a gentle voice and cares for us. We know His voice, we trust His voice, because His Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us by His gifts, sanctifies and keeps us in the true faith.

The voice of the shepherd is not hard to recognize. He speaks words of love to us again and again. The word love is used hundreds of times in the Bible and there are whole chapters devoted to it. God's love for us started in creation, continues in our redemption and remains without end. It is the very love we crave. We hear him in the gentle voice of forgiveness, in the love of a neighbor, in the Word which comforts our souls.

His voice is not discerned by its timbre or tone, but in the actions which He has done in our lives: lived, suffered, died, resurrected, redeemed, adopted, forgave...all for us.

Our Good Shepherd has conquered our most implacable foes of sin, death, and Devil. His resurrection is proof that the last of these has been overcome and now He has risen from the dead for the purpose of protecting us from their assault.

Our blindness and inability to find the right path is not really the problem it might seem. His Word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. His Holy Supper strengthens our faith, and renews the promises of our forgiveness bought by His own body and blood, given and shed for us, and received in, with and under the bread and wine at His table.

Our Good Shepherd has sought us out, placed us on His shoulders and carried us on the path we could not find. It is true that there are no other paths which bring us to heaven, no other door, but we don't have to fret about finding that right one; for Jesus leads us through the valley of the shadow of death and when we cannot follow Him because we have died, He carries us to His heavenly home, by Word and Sacrament.

Say again? Yes, He does! And we respond again: Alleluia! Christ is risen!

And may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide with you to life everlasting. Amen!