

**THE RADICAL RABBI:
“A RADICAL SHEPHERD”
(John 10:1-21)
5.1.22**

INTRODUCTION

Shepherds have a really interesting history in the Bible. They were considered by much of society to be the lowest of the low — people of such a dubious reputation that they were not allowed to give testimony in court. Because they were always ceremonially unclean due to the job they performed, they were never allowed to worship in the synagogue. Because they followed the flocks (sort of like migrant workers today who follow the harvests), they were never in a position to settle down and establish roots in any community. And for a culture like Israel, community was everything. As a result, they were viewed very negatively, much as homeless people are often viewed by our society today. And yet, contradictory as it might seem, leaders in that culture were also looked at as “shepherds.” Kings and prophets alike were viewed this way. David, a shepherd while a young man, became the greatest king Israel ever had. It was shepherds “watching their flocks by night” who first received the news from the angelic hosts that the Messiah had been born, and thus became the first evangelists to proclaim his birth. And Israel saw it as a privilege to be seen as the flock of God; as the psalmist had celebrated: ***[W]e are his people, the sheep of his pasture*** — ***Psalm 100:3b.***

So, as we return to our “radical rabbi” series, we will be seeing and hearing Jesus loudly and proudly tell the world that he is a shepherd; in fact, he is a “good” shepherd. So what makes him so good? That’s one of the questions we will be exploring this morning. So as we begin, **let’s start off with a word of prayer.**

TEXT

Now, before we head into this section of Scripture, we have to realize that this is actually the continuation of a confrontation that Jesus had with the Pharisees. We can know this because of how this section starts out: ***“Very truly I tell you Pharisees” — Jesus Christ, John 10:1a.*** Obviously there was already ongoing dialogue — and it stemmed from a particular healing that Jesus performed on a blind man. As wonderful as that healing was, and as much as it should have been celebrated, the Pharisees seemed to want to make sure it caused as much as controversy as possible.

First, they disputed that Jesus had had anything to do with this healing. He was a lawbreaker and a sinner for unnecessarily healing on the Sabbath. Next, they didn’t believe the man that he had ever even been blind — until they dragged his parents into the proceedings, who did confirm that he had been, in fact, born blind. Finally, in a rage at the healed man’s total lack of cooperation — meaning that he didn’t see Jesus the way they wanted him to — they threw him out of the synagogue. And these were the guys charged with Israel’s spiritual leadership!

So it is as a response to their actions, reflecting the blindness and stubbornness of their hearts, that Jesus launched into his latest teaching — and he does it by setting his lesson in one of the most familiar of settings for that time, place and people:

“[A]nyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber” — Jesus Christ, John 10:1b.

The “sheep pen” which Jesus mentions was most often an enclosure made of rocks. The “gate” would be either an actual gate or, at the least, a singular opening. That was the legitimate way to enter the sheep pen. Of course, the other way was the way that somebody not connected with the sheep would try to enter — as a thief or robber. Now while the word “thief” implies deception and trickery, the word “robber” lends itself more to the idea of violence and destruction.

Jesus then goes into details that most people in that culture would have recognized in order to illustrate the vast difference between himself and those who have been overseeing the flock of Israel: ***“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice” — Jesus Christ, John 10:2-5.***

One of the duties in taking care of the sheep was guarding the entry into the sheep pen through the night. Either a shepherd or a gatekeeper would do this by literally laying across the opening. Now it was not uncommon for several flocks to be kept in the same sheep pen. In the morning, when the shepherds arrived to begin caring for their flocks, the gatekeeper would recognize them and allow them entrance through the gate.

Now one of the real cool aspects of all this is the idea of “calling his own sheep by name.” A sheep pen would usually contain the sheep of several flocks. In the morning, as each shepherd came to the sheep pen, they called out to their flock with a distinct call. While sheep who did not belong to that shepherd would ignore him completely, the sheep of his particular flock would respond immediately. In this way, each flock would follow his specific shepherd out of the sheep pen and out into the fields. In fact, there is an amazing story that comes out of World War I. It seems that some soldiers tried to steal some sheep from a hillside outside of Jerusalem. The sleeping shepherd finally awoke to realize that his flock were being driven off. Instead of trying to get his sheep back by force, which probably would have accomplished nothing except probably getting himself killed, he simply called out to his sheep with their own distinctive call. The sheep heard the call and returned to their shepherd. And the soldiers left empty-handed; they simply could not stop the sheep from returning to the one they followed.

And Jesus was in this moment also giving us a wonderful illustration of the essence of this kind of master-disciple relationship. Shepherds do not drive or otherwise coerce their sheep; they lead sheep who follow them. This is the most fundamental picture of a disciple — one who willingly follows, but not just as a student but as one who makes his master’s teachings his own. And it was one of his disciples, Peter specifically, who wrote so clearly of this dynamic: ***To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving (Greek, “bequeathing,” gifting you an inheritance) you an example, that you should follow in his steps (literally, “imitate his track”) — I Peter 2:21.***

Now a thief or robber, who had no legitimate reason for being in the sheep pen, would be reduced to deception — to sneaking in over the wall of the sheep pen without being seen. But of course, the thief or robber has no concern for the sheep; the thief or robber has concern only for themselves. And even if a thief or robber did gain access to the sheep pen, it would do them no good because the sheep wouldn’t respond to a stranger, to somebody who couldn’t replicate their specific call. In fact, the precise opposite would happen; the sheep would run away, literally flee, from a stranger. Being unable to lead the sheep away, their only resort was to steal the sheep away — which is exactly what Jesus pointed out.

Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them — John 10:6.

Even though this was a parable told with a relatively recognizable image that people would have, or should have, readily grasped, apparently, for whatever reason, they didn’t. But, as always, Jesus had a ready reply that divinely fleshed out and applied the image he had created — and that image would be himself!

Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I AM the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I AM the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” — Jesus Christ, John 10:7-10.

Jesus now begins retelling this living, breathing parable — with himself in all the leading roles. Now he is not just telling about any old gate in a sheep pen, but he himself is the gate — the gate for his sheep. The “thieves and robbers” are (notice the present tense, meaning that he is addressing the circumstances of that present moment) the Pharisees, chief priests, scribes and other religious leaders of the time. They have become strangers to the people — who are the sheep. We know that because Jesus specifically tells us that the sheep have not listened to them, meaning that they have behaved like sheep always behave around strangers. And, to take the implication further, because they are seen as thieves and robbers, their concern is absolutely not for the sheep, but only for themselves. Their behaviors and attitudes toward the people confirmed this detail of Jesus’ story.

And then comes the first of two grand IDs that Jesus gives concerning himself: “I AM the gate.” In other words, he is the entrance to a place where they will find safety and security. And going out from that place, through him, will mean finding a life of abundance beyond belief and beyond measure that will meet all their needs. And note the certainty that Jesus provides his flock: “[W]hoever enters through me will be saved” — **Jesus Christ, John 10:9a**. No doubt, no uncertainty, no vague firm possibility of a definite maybe. Whoever enters through the gate that is Jesus Christ absolutely positively will be saved — meaning “delivered safe and sound.” Delivered from what? Sin, death and the power of the devil. Jesus is not only the only means of this salvation, but the absolutely certain means of this salvation as well.

And notice how incredibly broad and inclusive that invitation is: Whoever. The Greek tells us, “Any kind of man.” What a wonderful picture of unlimited invitation: Whoever you are, whatever you are, whatever your present, whatever your past — whoever enters into the life that is Jesus Christ will be saved — no exceptions! “Whoever” is the Bible’s version of “fill in the blank.” John 3:16 is similarly worded: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” — Jesus Christ, John 3:16**. So essentially, two incredibly important things are being shared here by Jesus: First, there is only one way to an abundant life, and second, he is that only way. He is the singular solution to all that a lasting life can be. Yes, abundant life is possible, everything that could make us happy is possible — but possible exclusively and only through surrender to Jesus Christ.

And then he gives himself another ID: **“I AM the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I AM the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep” — Jesus Christ, John 10:11-15.**

Jesus then explains himself another way — with another irreplaceable “I AM” title: the good shepherd — “good” meaning beautiful and virtuous. So what is it that makes Jesus so beautiful to his sheep? It’s what he says being a good shepherd means: He places so much value on his sheep that he would lay down his life for them.

This sets him vastly apart from others — mere pretenders to being good shepherds. That is how they may present themselves, but their true hearts show when they are in crisis. As danger approaches, they are not defending the sheep; in fact, in those critical moments, they don’t even care about the sheep. They abandon the sheep, leaving the flock to fend for itself. These “shepherds” run away. They are not interested in saving the sheep but are only interested in saving themselves. So much for the pretenders.

And then Jesus paints an incredible picture of the intimacy with which he knows his flock. It is reflective of the intimacy with which he knows his Father, and his Father knows him. Wow! Do we hear what he is saying? Jesus is telling us that when he lays down his life for his sheep, he is laying down his life for sheep that he knows, just like he knows his Father and his Father knows him — reminding us of the words of Paul to Timothy: **“The Lord knows those who are his” — Paul, II Timothy 2:19a.**

And then he continues on: ***“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” — Jesus Christ, John 10:16.***

Jesus is not only interested in the “flock” in Israel but also in the entire world. Seven hundred years before this moment, the prophet Isaiah had confirmed this: ***“[F]oreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant — these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.” The Sovereign Lord declares — he who gathers the exiles of Israel: “I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered” —***

Isaiah 56:6-8. And, as the author of Hebrews proclaims, ***[W]e do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone — Hebrews 2:9.*** God indeed so loves the world!

“The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life — only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” — Jesus Christ, John 10:17-18.

These verses show that Jesus was always in complete control of his circumstances. Men may have bound him, and struck him, and insulted him, and flogged him, and sentenced him, and crucified him, but none of this was done apart from the eternal plan of the Father and carried out to willing perfection by the Son. Jesus laid down his life in his Father’s timing and for his Father’s purpose. And their incredible harmony is shown in the fact that both Father and Son are spoken of through the NT as having raised Jesus from the dead. The Father shared this authority with his Son.

And of course, as Jesus finishes, his words cause all kinds of problems: ***The Jews who heard these words were again divided. Many of them said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?” But others said, “These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?” — John 10:19-21.***

Notice the word “again” when John writes that the Jews listening to Jesus were divided. They’d been here before and, just like before, there was deep division within that audience. For some, their conclusion appeared easy: “He’s in league with the devil and absolutely out of his mind.” For others, that conclusion didn’t make any sense: “How in the world can you even think that? Could somebody doing the devil’s business perform the miracle that just happened here? Doesn’t that seem the least little bit more like God-stuff versus devil-stuff?” But it seems impossible to come to an agreement where this radical rabbi is concerned. And so the divisions would continue.

APPLICATION

This is one of the truly amazing sections of Scripture there are. And there are some amazing lessons we can draw from these words of Jesus as well:

First, and most important, as Jesus would say in the Upper Room: ***“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” — Jesus Christ, John 14:6.*** Jesus is the one and only Gate; he is the one and only Good Shepherd. The world is so convinced that there are multiple ways to God; after all, why would a God of love limit himself to only one way? But as Solomon wrote: ***There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death — Proverbs 14:12 (NASB1995).*** It is appropriate that Jesus used the imagery of a gate because a gate shuts some people in and shuts other people out. And despite the fact that Jesus still divides people, it is impossible to be neutral about him. In fact, we are not given that option. As Jesus himself said: ***“[I]f you do not believe that I am he (literally, ‘I AM’), you will indeed die in your sins” — Jesus Christ, John 8:24.*** Jesus is God. He knew it and declared it. Any belief outside of that belief will indeed lead to dying in your sins — and an eternal separation from God in hell and a lifetime of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual suffering that will never end.

Second is understanding that faith in Jesus Christ is all about following him. So what does that mean? It means that where he leads, we follow. It means that how he is, we are. His attitudes become our attitudes. His responses become our responses. There is no such thing as being a sheep in his pasture but doing things our way. If we are truly followers of Jesus Christ, there is no “our” way. There is only his way. But why wouldn’t we be content with that, even celebrating that? His ways are always best; nothing else even comes close. To be his sheep means to follow our Good Shepherd wherever he goes — no limits.

CONCLUSION

And then, as we prepare for communion this morning, a story about the ultimate meaning of this scripture:

I once was asked to officiate at an elderly woman’s funeral. She was very involved in all the planning for this funeral. One of the things she told me, as we sat down to begin this process, was, “I do not want ‘Amazing Grace’ to be in my funeral.” I responded by telling her that the music was something totally up to her and her family; I really didn’t have anything to do with that. But she kept insisting to me: “I don’t want any mention of it; I don’t want any part of it played for any reason.” She was making such a point of it that I finally had to ask her why she felt so strongly about this. She looked me right in the eye and said, “I am not a wretch!”

Growing up in church, I knew immediately to what she was referring. The song “Amazing Grace” begins with the lyrics: *Amazing grace! How sweet the sound — that saved a wretch like me!* I never found out if she knew the history of that song or its lyricist — an Englishman named John Newton who had a notorious reputation as the captain of a slave ship that brought men, women and children out of Africa to their destinations. One night his ship was destroyed in a storm at sea. In desperate fear for his life, he called out to God to save him — which he did. He became a Christian out of that moment, and “Amazing Grace” is essentially his testimony — testimony that included the acknowledgement that, at one point in his life, he was a “wretch.” She was repulsed by the very notion of anybody viewing her as a “wretch.”

Her attitude gave me an opportunity to share the gospel with her, explaining that such a statement’s being true or false is all about the standard by which one is being judged. If you are judging against the standard of a slave ship captain, then yes, you may not be a wretch. But if you are viewed the absolute holy purity of God, then being seen as a wretch is completely appropriate.

I never found out if this woman came to faith in Christ. But I have run into similar attitudes, often when people view the Bible, that they feel insulted by some way in which the Bible refers to people. One of those potentially insulting comparisons is when the Bible refers to us as “sheep.” Who wants to be thought of as stupid and defenseless? But when considered against the reality of sin, I absolutely am a sheep. I cannot change my situation; there is nothing I can do to save myself. In my own strength, I am at the mercy of Satan’s attacks. I cannot direct my life. I cannot obtain a life of abundance that will last. I cannot solve my sin problem. I am as helpless as the tiniest little lamb.

But Jesus comes along and says, “I know you are not smart and not clever. I know you cannot get from one place to the next successfully. I know you cannot change your life’s situation. Then let me. Let me guard you and guide you. Let me supply you. Let me bring you a life of abundance that will never be taken away. Simply surrender yourself to me. Come and live in my sheep pen. Listen only to my voice, to my call. Only leave the sheep pen to follow me. I will guide you. I will defend you. I will supply you. I will take care of all your needs — forever.”

Who wouldn’t want that? Am I a sheep? Absolutely. But will Jesus be the shepherd for my life anyway? Without question.

So now, as we transition to communion this morning, let’s pray to the great Shepherd of the sheep that he will guide us through this celebration. Let’s pray.