

Easter 4-April 21, 2024 (Good Shepherd Sunday)

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

John 10:11-18

“One Flock, One Shepherd”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you this day from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

We love having options. We love having choices. We love being in control.

While most of us would agree with most of these statements, sometimes having so many choices can cause problems. If you go to a restaurant with a large menu, it can be hard to decide what to eat and often the one taking your order will give you another option of giving you more time so you can be sure that your decision of what you order is really what you want. Deciding what vehicle you would like to purchase has almost unlimited options. There are so many body styles, colors, safety features, and sizes of vehicles to do whatever you want them to do. I remember 50 years ago when the big decision in purchasing a vehicle was if it had power steering and power brakes. Even in our churches, we look for options that meet what we are looking for in worship. It can be nice to have so many choices, but again having so many options can also be confusing.

On Good Shepherd Sunday, which is always highlighted on this 4th Sunday of Easter, Jesus does not give us many options to choose from. On Good Shepherd Sunday, Jesus makes it clear that there is One Flock and One Shepherd. Peter ended his sermon that we heard in the first lesson from Acts, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” There are no options when it comes to our salvation. We can either believe what Jesus says or as Jesus says, we are like thieves and robbers who try to break in by another way.

When Jesus introduces himself as the Good Shepherd at the beginning of the 10th chapter of John, he describes himself as the gate or the door. Notice once again, the short menu of choices for entering the kingdom of heaven. There is only one gate. The gate that Jesus was speaking about as a metaphor to the kingdom of heaven helped his rural listeners was how to enter the sheepfold. There are less than a few options for entering the sheep fold or the kingdom of heaven. There is only one and Jesus is not only the gatekeeper. Jesus is the gate. That doesn’t mean that ever since Jesus said these words, people have still been seeking for another way into the sheepfold. After all, we like options, choices, and being in control, don’t we?

An example that I thought about that might make some more sense to more modern-day listeners regarding gates might be what you often experience in airports. My experience in flying is pretty limited, but I have flown enough to have seen and remember some of the evolutions in technology from having tickets sent to you in the mail from a travel agent that you needed to board a plane to being able to print them from a kiosk in the airport simply by scanning your driver’s license and now all you need to do is update the app on your phone with your airline which will give you all that is necessary to board the plane so you reach your destination. One thing has not changed during this time. For you to reach your desired destination, you must enter through one gate to go where you want to go.

Even in the smallest of airports, there is more than one gate to board different planes.

But if you could in some way sneak by the gatekeeper of another gate, you would not reach your desired destination. There is only one gate to the place you want to go. This winter, my son and our daughter-in-law enjoyed a trip to the Dominican Republic. They were delayed making it back to the states and were unable to go through the gate to board the next plane to take them home. Although the plane was still at the airport and still connected by the boarding bridge from the gate in the terminal and they learned that this same plane didn't have another flight after they landed at the next destination and there was room on the plane still for everyone who arrived a few minutes late to board, the one in charge of the gate had announced that the door had been shut on the plane and boarding was no longer an option. Instead of simply opening the door to the plane again so everyone that was just a few minutes late could get to their destination, they all learned the hard lesson that there was one gate and one gatekeeper, and they were not in control. There were no other options that evening for getting to their destination. They felt as useless as the hired hands that Jesus talked about.

Jesus the good shepherd doesn't give any credit to hired hands who are not the shepherd. Jesus doesn't encourage sheep to establish relationships with the hired hands who could teach them other ways to get into the sheepfold. Hired hands are not assigned to watch the gates. Hired hands do not risk their lives to save or protect others from danger. We all know John 3:16 by heart, but I just noticed how much 1 John 3:16 resembles that familiar verse. "We know love by this, that {Jesus Christ} laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Sounds like the love that God had for us that he gave his Son so that whoever believes in him has eternal life. Jesus laid down his life and we ought to lay down our lives. Jesus did. We should. We don't because we are not shepherds, we are only hired hands.

The shepherds that Jesus referred to in his day would allow only their sheep that knew their voice into their fold. After gathering their flocks together for the night, the shepherds would literally become the gate that would protect their flocks from anything that would harm them by laying down on the ground and be what separated the sheep from whatever might harm them. You can almost imagine the good shepherd calmly going to sleep and telling those who want to enter by another way, the only way into this fold is over my dead body.

And it is our Lord's dead body which becomes the only way any of us get into the sheepfold. We got in through the gate. He is the one who has laid his life down and has taken it up again and goes after other sheep that he wants to bring into his flock. Getting into the flock is unlike anything else we do in this life. We simply get into the one flock by hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd.

I have seen posts from several schools now who have had new members added to the National Honor Society. Not everyone gets into this group. Not everyone receives a letter indicating that they have the credentials to be welcomed into this group. Sports teams who travel are put together based on various levels of skills of those who want to travel. Not everyone gets to be on the team they hope to be on. Just about everything we do during the week is evaluated by how well we do our jobs and if we don't perform, we can be removed from the team. This again puts us in control, and we often learn that being in control isn't always what we need.

Thanks be to God that we are not in control of our salvation. Jesus has one flock and is the only shepherd. He has spoken this good news to you, and you have heard his voice today. You are in his flock. He will protect you and lead you to streams of living water. Jesus the Good Shepherd has laid his life down for you and has taken it up so that his kingdom is yours forever and can never be taken away. Amen