<Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23:1-6; John 10:1-10>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

According the shepherds in the Scottish highlands, sheep are not the smartest of creatures. For instance, a sheep will essentially follow its nose forward while grazing, without picking up its eyes to see or respond to where it is headed and what is in front of it. This has, notably, led to many stories and anecdotes about sheep finding themselves either lost and/or in sticky situations. Even our Scriptures, in both the Old and New Testaments, make reference to sheep who have gone astray or wandered off, and today’s gospel reading from John makes particular note of how Jesus has come to be, himself, and set the example of the true “good shepherd” - as well as the gate to the sheepfold and the gatekeeper.

But in the Scottish highlands there exist some particularly sweet-tasting grass that sheep love to eat, and so when they find a patch, they follow along where it leads them, heedless and oblivious to where it leads or what is around them. Ultimately, in many cases, this leads a sheep to become stuck on a ledge along steep drop-offs. Over the course of years, their shepherds have learned how to actually respond, and while it may seem cruel to those of us who are less-experienced with shepherding, their response is to wait.

The shepherds initially tried to rescue the sheep straight off, as soon as it was discovered where they were. After all, who knows when a sheep might take a misstep and fall off the ledge! This is the reaction many of us likely would have. But time and time again the shepherds experienced the sheep immediately turning around and returning to these ledges, and the potential peril they held, because there was still grass there for grazing. The sheep didn’t care about any of the peril or danger; they only wanted access to the sweet-tasting grass. And so, the shepherds learned to wait. They allowed the sheep to graze there, eating all the grass that was available, and then to wait longer until the sheep was tired and weak. Then, and only then, the shepherd would rescue the sheep - when there was no more sweet-tasting grass to tempt them, when they had no more energy to try and run or jump away, when they could no longer pretend to be able to make do for themselves…then the shepherd would rescue them and bring them back to the fold.

My friends, brothers and sisters in faith, I say this will all love and understanding, with myself included: we are sheep. And that may be one of the most important distinctions I ever make, or we ever remember, in our lives of faith. We are the sheep, and not the shepherds. We are the flock, and not the gatekeepers.

Much has been said, written, debated and argued in the last two-thousand-plus years regarding where the lines of the church are, and who is on which side of that line at any given point. I’m not going to make any arguments for any of those lines right now, that’s not the point, but we would do well to acknowledge the realities of the church in the

world over the course of history. And as today - the Fourth Sunday of Easter - is sometimes known as “Good Shepherd Sunday,” it is important to note and acknowledge that there are lines which exist. Jesus, in this discourse, even acknowledges them, referring to the sheepfold, the gatekeeper, and the gate. Humanity has, for millennia and perhaps even since time began, engaged the effort of drawing and redrawing lines.

Our reading from John this morning begins in the middle of a conversation. In fact, this conversation began in our Sunday readings several weeks ago during the season of Lent, when Jesus saw a man born blind and then, on the sabbath, healed him of his blindness by spitting in the dirt to make mud, wiping it on the mans eyes, and then telling him to go wash. Which he did, and was healed of his blindness, as well as his social status as someone on the margins of society, someone unclean. Jesus did this, on the sabbath, and the first questions of the religious leaders were, “who did this and by what authority?” They felt that a line, an established boundary of acceptability had been broken and transgressed, and so they wanted to know who and when and where, so that they could correct the error. So that they could rebuild the fence. So that they could reestablish the line, and their own authority over it. And in response to their questions, Jesus begins to address the lines that have been drawn and established, as well as the authority over them, by using the familiar cultural experience of shepherding.

Shepherding is less familiar to us now, or at least to me, but I received another insight about the work, particularly as it applies to fencing around an expansive enclosure. When ranchers and farmers made their way westward toward the Rockies, and also in the vast expanses of Australia, they found that all their time was spent on maintaining, fixing, and strengthening the fences of their boundaries. So vast was the landscape that by the time the ranchers worked their way from one point in the fence line back around to that point, making all the needed repairs along the way, the fence had been damaged again by the flock coming in contact with it and trying to get beyond it. Recognizing this was unsustainable, they determined another way to keep the flock safe and more centrally located within their bounds. Rather than focusing all their time, energy, and attention on the lines of the fence itself, they focused on what the flock truly needed: water and sustenance. They dug deeper wells of cleaner water in the middle of their property, providing for better water and more abundance of the kinds of resources the flock naturally desired. Rather than focusing on the fence to keep the animals in, they focused on better meeting the needs of the flock, and the issues with the fence resolved themselves.

In our reading from John’s gospel, we are reminded that Jesus is the good shepherd, the one who can point us back to the source of life and living, of healing and wholeness, of abundance in life. Yet we become so preoccupied with the fencing, as sheep who have wandered and strayed, that we forget to proclaim and point back to the one who is the source of our security and our living. We try so hard to take on the work of the shepherd addressing the fence that we forget that our true role is to live as the ones who have found the deep well, and to bring others to it.

But what does that even look like, to live, then, as “those who are being saved”? There’s a reason why this gospel reading is paired with the depiction of the early church, the first apostles, living in communion in the Spirit of God. Because that is our example, and the answer to our question. These first apostles, the disciples who have witnessed both the pain of the crucifixion and the reality of the resurrection, now in the Spirit of God seek to live out these new realities in the world, in their daily living. Again, we enter this reading in the middle of an ongoing story; what we read today is the continuation of the Pentecost story. It is now the evening of the Pentecostal moment, and we see how their lives are directed in the days that follow.

Joining together, fully in worship. Sharing with one another all good gifts which they have received. Ensuring that no one is in need, and that all remember the presence and providence of the One who provides life in abundance, their Good Shepherd. Their daily living, their goal, is to continue pointing beyond themselves back to Christ; that was the crux of Peter’s Pentecost sermon that morning, and it will continue to be the crux of the sermons that will be made throughout the rest of The Book of Acts. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the one who brings life, and life abundant.

As commentator Meg Jenista puts it, “And when God’s people continuously respond to the infiltrating, infusing power of the Holy Spirit, it isn’t just a moment of salvation but a process of learning to live differently.”

Not to worry about the lines or the fences. Not to squabble about who has authority. To constantly point back to Christ. And in this, they remember fully that they are merely the sheep of the pasture. They will make mistakes, and wander, and stray. Some will blindly follow a patch of sweet-tasting grass while grazing. Others will go and accidentally break the fence lines. None will be perfect; they, we, are all sheep.

But as those who are being saved, and striving to live faithfully each day, our calling, our role, is offer that example for all the world to see. And when asked, to help show the way back to the One who offers life. Who provides protection and sustenance, peace and fulfillment. The One who is both gate and gatekeeper, deep well and sheepfold. This is our role, as those who are constantly in the midst of being saved - saved from ourselves, saved from others, saved from all that would entice and draw us away from true life.

I am a sheep - humble, wayward, and sometimes less than smart. Whatever grace I have been offered is evidenced in the acceptance that I am constantly in a state of being saved, not by my own efforts, but by listening for the one whose voice I know, who calls me by name. May we all live in such grace, as those who are being saved, and may we help others to hear the Good Shepherd’s voice calling their name, as well. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)