

The Good Shepherd

April 13, 2014

Scripture Text: John 10:1-18

Lesson Synopsis: Student will explore themes of leadership and the identity of Jesus. Of special importance will be the recognition of Jesus' voice and Jesus' identifications of himself as both "the gate" and the "good shepherd."

Digging In

Leadership: 10:1-6

As Jesus begins employing pastoral imagery (of sheep and shepherd) in 10:1-6, we are made aware very quickly of his audience. Chapter 9 closed with a word of judgment against the Pharisees (9:40-41), and in 10:1 Jesus continues his conversation with the same group. As Gail O'Day explains, "Instead of continuing to address the Pharisees' situation directly (9:41), Jesus addresses it more obliquely through his use of figurative language..."ⁱ As Jesus' "figurative language" unfolds, it becomes clear, at least to the reader, that he is offering a commentary on the Pharisees' leadership of the people.

In pursuit of his critique of Pharisaic leadership, Jesus employs imagery that is both grounded in the Old Testament and relevant to his hearers. As to being grounded in the Old Testament, the image of religious leaders as shepherds is seen in the prophets, often in a negative sense. Ezekiel 34:1-10 stands as a prime example of this imagery in saying:ⁱⁱ

"This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals..."

The above text accounts for only the first five verses of a ten verse castigation of Israel's religious leaders. Their vocation is described through shepherding imagery, and they are condemned for failing in their shepherding duties.

In regard to relevance to his hearers, Jesus employs imagery common to everyday life. People knew about sheep and shepherds. Therefore, when Jesus speaks of them, his words

are readily available to his hearers. This would be like a pastor talking about the Duke/UNC basketball rivalry to a congregation in Durham, NC. Everyone already knows about the rivalry (and have probably already taken sides!). Thus, the imagery would be readily available to them. The same is true as Jesus speaks of shepherds.

As his speech unfolds, Jesus takes the shepherding imagery in a very specific direction. Rather than critiquing the exercise of shepherding responsibilities as Ezekiel 34 does, Jesus instead points to the identity of the shepherd. In Jesus' context, sheep were kept in pens for protection throughout the night. These pens would be surrounded by stone walls topped with briars to keep out predators and thieves. As he brings such pens to mind, Jesus says, "...anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep" (10:1b-2). The shepherd is then described in the following positive terms:

- "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him" (10:3a).
 - In this, the shepherd is recognized by the gatekeeper and given access due to his position.
- "The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep out by name and leads them out. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." (10:3b).
 - In this, the sheep also recognize the shepherd and respond to his voice. Moreover, they reject the leadership of all but the shepherd.

While the idea of sheep responding to the shepherd's voice is foreign to us, it is not to pastoral cultures. In his commentary on this passage, Gary Burge relates the following story:

During the Palestinian uprising in the late 1980s the Israeli army decided to punish a village near Bethlehem for not paying its taxes (which, the village claimed, simply financed their occupation). The officer in command rounded up all of the village animals and placed them in a large barbed-wire pen. Later in the week he was approached by a woman who begged him to release her flock, arguing that since her husband was dead, the animals were her only source of livelihood. He pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and humorously quipped that it was impossible because he could not find her animals. She asked that if she could in fact separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take them? He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman's son produced a small reed flute. He played a simple tune again and again – and soon sheep heads began popping up across the pen. The young boy continued his music and walked home, followed by his flock of twenty-five sheep.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the same type of picture that Jesus evokes in speaking of the sheep and shepherd. The true shepherd is recognized by both the gatekeeper and the sheep, and the sheep hear his voice and follow him. As mentioned above, in saying all of this, Jesus is offering a commentary

on the Pharisees, who would correspond with illegitimate shepherds who climb over the wall. As will become clear as the text progresses, Jesus himself should be understood as the shepherd. None of this is apparent to the Pharisees, though (10:6), and Jesus goes on to play with the imagery further.

The Gate: 10:7-10

Moving on, Jesus pushes the imagery he has already used in an unexpected direction. We are expecting him to identify himself with the shepherd. Instead, he calls himself “the gate for the sheep” (10:7). The meaning of this saying is found in verse 9 as Jesus reiterates his point in saying, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.” As O’Day notes, “Jesus explicitly identifies himself as the means to salvation ... The promise of entering through the gate to find salvation ... identifies Jesus as the point of access to God for the flock.” In identifying himself as the gate, Jesus speaks of himself in high terms. He is the means of salvation and relationship to God!

By contrast, there are others who came before Jesus whom he identifies as “thieves and robbers.” These correspond to the thief in verse 10 who “comes only to steal kill and destroy.” A difficult point for interpretation is that Jesus speaks of “all” who came before him in this way (10:8). This should not be understood as a blanket statement referring to all leaders of Israel before Jesus. Many of these like Moses were held in high esteem. Instead, “Jesus is referring to the religious establishment of his own day ... and to all the preceding ‘authorities’ who were cut from the same bolt of cloth.”^{iv} Even as Jesus speaks of himself in high terms (the gate), he offers a sharp word of judgment on those who have led the people poorly and who even now reject God’s messiah. These are thieves, and they serve the purpose of destroying life (10:10).

At the end of this section of the passage, Jesus draws another line of distinction between himself and those he has called “thieves and robbers.” While these false leaders serve to destroy life (steal, kill, and destroy), Jesus himself “[has] come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” This is the kind of life that Jesus has already described in calling himself the gate. Those who enter through him “will come in and go out, and find pasture” (10:9b). To describe what this means in the practicalities of life, Mounce argues, “The life that Jesus came to provide is not physical but spiritual. Yet that which is spiritual naturally overflows into every aspect of physical existence. Life embraces all that it means to be alive in this world and firmly attached by faith to the living Lord.” Jesus, who as the gate provides salvation and access to God, brings life to his people!

The Good Shepherd

After identifying himself as the gate, Jesus continues in the direction we expected in the first place by identifying himself as “the good shepherd.” Here contrast is made between the shepherd and the hired hand. When trouble comes, the hired hand leaves the sheep to the wolves. After all, they aren’t his sheep! The good shepherd, though, “lays down his life for the

sheep” (10:11), refusing to abandon them to danger. With this and all that has gone before in mind, Jesus goes on to explain what it means for him to be the good shepherd:

- “I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father...” (10:14)
- “...and I lay down my life for the sheep.” (10:15)
- “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also.”

Once again, we hear of the relationship between the sheep and the shepherd. Jesus knows his own and they know him even as Jesus and the Father know one another. More than this, because Jesus is obedient to the Father and cares for his sheep as the good shepherd, he will lay down his life for his flock. As the gospel progresses, we see Jesus quite literally playing the role of the good shepherd by laying down his life. The present passage wants to make clear that Jesus is not overpowered in the crucifixion. Instead, he is in complete control and offers his life willingly (10:17-18). Finally, Jesus has other sheep that will be incorporated into his flock. The mention of these “other” sheep looks to the inclusion of Gentiles into God’s people. They too will enter through Jesus the gate and will call him their shepherd.

Application

The Identity of Jesus

While this passage can be pursued in a number of directions, any application must look first to the presentation of Jesus’ identity in this passage. Twice Jesus makes a grand statement about himself – he is both gate and shepherd for his people. In using these images, Jesus identifies himself as the way to salvation and the one who has cared and continues to care for those who trust on him. As an ancient preacher named John Chrysostom said, “When he brings us to the Father he calls himself a Door [or gate], when he takes care of us, a Shepherd.”^v A first question to ask as we consider this passage is whether or not we have affirmed Jesus as both gate and good shepherd in our own lives. Have we trusted in him for our salvation? If we have entered through Jesus as our gate to salvation, then have we considered the beauty of the shepherd who laid down his life that this might be so? In a sense, we might say that both gate and shepherd imagery point to our salvation. It is through laying down his life as the good shepherd that Jesus becomes the gate to the Father for sinners. Have we allowed this imagery to take hold of us and lead us to appreciate the good shepherd who has made the way for our fullness of life?

Knowing the Shepherd

We cannot read this passage without noting that Jesus several times affirms that he knows his sheep and his sheep know him. On one level, the sheep recognize his voice. On

another level, they know him as Jesus knows the Father. These are high statements about Jesus' relationship to his people! A good question to ask might be whether we recognize Jesus' voice as he leads us. While we affirm that we recognize Jesus' voice at our initial call to salvation, we must also go through the process of learning to recognize it as we continue to follow in his way.

A second question to ask is about the quality of our relationship to our Lord. Would we affirm with Jesus that our relationship to him is like the relationship that Jesus shares with the Father? In this, we see that salvation is not just a matter of waiting for heaven. No, it is also a relationship that begins at conversion. In fact, Jesus defines eternal life in relational terms. In John 17:3 he says, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent." As with any relationship, our relationship to Jesus takes time and grows as we come to know him better. This is a relationship that we can pursue through prayer, Bible study, and the like. And as we attend to the relationship, we come to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd.

Leadership

Another theme of this passage is poor or false leadership. Even as Jesus names himself as the good shepherd, he also speaks of others who have laid an illegitimate claim on the sheep. These are destructive personalities who wreak havoc on God's people, serving to steal, kill, and destroy those to whom Jesus came to give life. Importantly, the sheep in Jesus' speech have refused to listen to these illegitimate leaders because they do not recognize their voices. As Mounce says, "True believers have a measure of spiritual discernment that alerts them to false teachers. When questionable doctrine is laid before them, they instinctively recognize it for what it is. The voice of truth can never be successfully imitated by the voice of error. Sheep who know the shepherd are not led astray."^{vi} To questionable doctrine, we might also add questionable practice that leads to disunity or a lack of holiness in congregations. Jesus' sheep are not fooled, though. It is because the sheep know the voice of Jesus that they are able to reject the voices of illegitimate leadership. With this in mind, there will be times when we will need to discern whether the voices of Christian leadership are consistent with the voice of Christ. If they are not, then we as Jesus' people must be careful to follow the voice of our Good Shepherd.

Teaching Helps

Icbreaker: To get people talking, begin with the following question, "What is your favorite Bible verse and why?" Go around the room, allowing everyone to answer who wishes to do so.

Time for Sharing: Ask class members if there is anything from last week's readings in the gospel of John that they would like to share with the class. Did they have any important insights? How about questions? If a person asks a question, open it up for class discussion. If needed, write it down and make a note to do further research or ask the pastor about it during the coming week.

Lesson Introduction: Let students know that today's lesson will come from John 10:1-18 and invite them to turn in their Bibles to that passage.

Scripture Reading: John 10:1-6

- **Question:** Who is Jesus talking to in this passage?
- **Question:** In his speech, Jesus contrasts two characters. Who are they?
- **Question:** What are the marks of a thief/robber in this passage?
- **Question:** What are the marks of a shepherd in this passage?
- **Question:** Why do you think that Jesus tells this story to the Pharisees? Who should we understand as the thief/robber? Who should we understand as the shepherd?
- **Explain:** Explain that Jesus is offering a critique of the Pharisee's leadership in line with other prophetic critiques of the same. Read Ezekiel 34:1-5 and note that Jesus takes the imagery in a different direction. Rather than saying they are leading badly, Jesus calls the Pharisees illegitimate leaders.
- **Question:** If the Pharisees are the thieves/robbers, then who is the shepherd?

Scripture Reading: John 10:7-10

- **Question:** As Jesus continues in this passage, he moves the imagery in a different direction. To what does Jesus compare himself?
- **Question:** What does it mean for Jesus to be the gate? What does he bring to those who enter through him?
- **Question:** Jesus says that all who came before him are thieves and robbers. Who do you think he is referring to?
- **Question:** If we continue applying the same interpretive pattern we have been using, then the Pharisees would once again function as the thief in the story. How can poor or illegitimate leadership steal, kill, and destroy within a community?
- **Question:** What do you think Jesus means when he speaks of bringing life to the full?

Scripture Reading: John 10:11-18

- **Question:** Jesus has already compared himself to the gate. To what does he compare himself in this passage?
- **Question:** What is the mark of the good shepherd according to v. 11?
- **Question:** Why would the hired hand run away when facing danger?
- **Question:** Why would the shepherd lay down his life instead of running away?
- **Question:** According to vv. 14-16, what are the other marks of the good shepherd?

- **Question:** Who are the sheep outside of this pen?
- **Question:** With all of this in mind, how does Jesus function as our good shepherd?

The Identity of Jesus: The Gate

- **Question:** If we take Jesus seriously when he calls himself the gate, what will this mean for our lives?

The Identity of Jesus: The Good Shepherd

- **Question:** If we take Jesus seriously when he calls himself the good shepherd, what will this mean for our lives?

Relationship

- **Question:** According to vv. 3-5, what are the marks of Jesus' sheep?
- **Question:** According to vv. 14-16, what are other marks of Jesus' sheep?
- **Question:** What relationship serves as the model for Jesus' relationship to his sheep?
- **Question:** Have you ever met someone who seemed to have this kind of relationship with God? What were they like?
- **Question:** How can we pursue an intimate relationship with God?
- **Question:** How do we come to recognize Jesus' voice?

Leadership

- **Question:** While Jesus has much to say about himself and his people, he also speaks of religious leadership. What do you think are marks of good leadership in the Church?
- **Question:** How can we know when leaders are taking us in the wrong direction?
- **Question:** How should we respond when we believe that our leaders are taking us in the wrong way?

ⁱ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 667.

ⁱⁱ Robert H. Mounce, "John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 499.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary M. Burge, *John* (Zondervan, 2009), 302.

^{iv} Mounce, "John," 502.

^v As quoted in Mounce: Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid., 501.