

I grew up in big city. Phoenix, Arizona. At the time of my childhood there were approximately 1 million people living in Phoenix and it was growing rapidly. We had to drive for about an hour or so if we wanted to leave behind the strip malls and concrete. Needless to say, I didn't encounter many sheep in my day to day life. In fact, the only interactions I have had with sheep is at a petting zoo. Now that I think of it, I think they were actually goats. I may not have ever had personal contact with even one sheep, much less a flock of sheep. Now, I haven't had a chance to get to know most of you, are any of you shepherds by trade? I had a feeling that might be the case. This Fourth Sunday of Easter is celebrated in many churches as "Good Shepherd" Sunday, but most of us have a very limited understanding of what being a shepherd really means.

New Testament Professor Sarah Henrich writes about a preacher who lived in Africa. In one of his sermons He talked about how the people of a village knew each other's sheep the way we might know one another's children. As he sat in a group in the village, a person would stop by, "Have you seen my sheep so-and-so," identifying his own sheep by name. Through the dark night he heard villagers calling out names. "They are calling their sheep," one of the locals told him. "They will all find each other." This aspect of village life - in which people know which sheep are theirs and which belong to someone else, where sheep themselves know to whom they belong, was as familiar to Jesus as it is unfamiliar to us.<sup>1</sup>

So when Jesus is faced with trying to explain his role and his identity to the Pharisees and the other people gathered, using a shepherding metaphor was a natural choice. Our Gospel text from John chapter 10 comes directly after the story of Jesus giving sight to the man blind from birth in John 9. The Pharisees who opposed Jesus, strictly adhered to the Jewish law of not doing any work on the sabbath. When Jesus healed the blind man on the sabbath, they took this to mean that Jesus must then be a sinner. But if Jesus is a sinner, he couldn't also be the son God because the son of God couldn't be a sinner. The Pharisees overhear Jesus talking to the man born blind after

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Henrich, "Commentary on John 10:1-10," *Working Preacher*, May 15, 2011, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=931](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=931).

they had driven him out of the synagogue. Jesus tells the healed man “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” The Pharisees are shocked and they say to Jesus “Surely we are not blind, are we?” 41 Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.

There is no break after Jesus’ comments to the Pharisees at the end of chapter 9. Instead, Jesus launches immediately into this discourse about sheep and gates and shepherds in an attempt to explain his purpose and identity. Jesus begins by describing himself as a shepherd. He says that the shepherd knows the sheep by name and the sheep know the shepherd’s voice. The shepherd brings the sheep out of the pen and they follow him because they belong to him and they recognize his voice.

But like countless other instances in John’s Gospel, the people listening to Jesus don’t get it. Even as familiar as this scenario was for them, it didn’t make sense. So Jesus tries again with a different metaphor. This time, he says “I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is important to note that the metaphor of the gate is not one of exclusion, not a license to think of ourselves as Jesus’ true sheep and others as outsiders. (If we use it that way, we become like the Pharisees who expelled the blind man from their community.) The purpose of the gate is not to keep out other sheep. While Jesus says “whoever enters by me will be saved,” he does not say those who enter another pen through another gate will be lost. Jesus does say in verse 16, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” The purpose of the gate is to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep, not to keep some sheep out of the fold.

There is one role in these metaphors that doesn't get explained. The gatekeeper. The one who lets the shepherd in. In this metaphor that Jesus uses to explain to the Pharisees and the people gathered that he is sent by God, who is the gatekeeper? Is Jesus the shepherd and the gate and the gatekeeper all in one? Or maybe the gatekeeper is God or the Holy Spirit. One thing I am pretty sure of – it's not the church. I'm also sure that the pen in which the sheep reside is not the church either. This isn't a perfect metaphor, but bear with me. All too often, church folks, church communities, even denominations of churches take it upon themselves to decide if a particular individual or group of people belong in the pen that is entered through the gate of Jesus, or if they are worthy of being called by name and led out by Jesus. The job of the gatekeeper? That's not our job.

In 2013 I served as a camp chaplain and cabin counselor at Pilgrim Firs which is a United Church of Christ Camp located in Port Orchard, Washington. I had never been to any church camp before that summer and I was nervous about who would be the co-counselor for the cabin. My partner was a young woman who had been a camper at Pilgrim Firs for years and then continued on to be a camp counselor. She had been a lifeguard, studied politics, economics, and philosophy at the University of Washington, she had a great sense of humor and was wonderful with the campers.

A few days into our time at camp, I asked if she was active at her church thinking that they were lucky to have such a wonderful person in their congregation. She looked at me and then at the tattoos on her arms and said "I'm not really welcome there." I wish I could say I was surprised. Her comment saddened me but did not surprise me. "You are not welcome at church because of your tattoos?" I asked. She went on to tell me that no one had come up to her and said she was not allowed to come to church because she had ink in her skin, but she had been on the receiving end of mean looks and rolled eyes. She had overheard multiple comments about how her tattoos were unladylike and not the type of thing a good Christian would have.

Just so we're all on the same page, her tattoos were not hateful or racist or grotesque. Among them is a beautiful tree that covers most of her upper arm on side; a seahorse and one that symbolizes infinite love. These are hardly images that would be considered offensive or inappropriate if they were on paper instead of skin. Yet these indelible self-expressions on her skin instigated hurtful looks and comments that led an amazing young woman to feel rejected and unwanted by her own church community. As a result, her trust in any church had been broken.

Now, I'm not saying that we don't have a role in protecting each other. There are certainly occasions when the safety and wellbeing of our church folks means that individuals who exhibit destructive or abusive behavior may need to be kept out of the church community. That's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about the church deciding who is worthy of being called into God's flock.

If the church is not the gatekeeper, what role does the church play in this metaphor if any? It seems to me that the church's role is to provide a community in which all of us sheep help each other discern our shepherd's voice. There are many forces in the world that make promises of happiness and fulfillment. If we just drive the right car, if we work hard enough to climb up the next rung of the corporate ladder, if we buy the right gadget, the newest phone, the biggest house. Or forces that tell us there isn't enough to go around – enough land, enough food, enough money... and so we should be scared and ruthless, and fight for our slice of the pie. These voices, these thieves and bandits threaten to steal and kill and destroy. They do not bring abundant life. They might bring abundant stuff, or abundant wealth, but not the abundant life that Jesus invites us to live.

Jesus invites us into a life of community that brings intimacy and honesty not only in our relationships with God but with our fellow human beings. How abundant would life be if we worried less about whether we knew enough sports statistics to be accepted as one of the guys at work and instead focused on knowing and loving our neighbors, all of our neighbors because God first loved us? How abundant would life be if we ignored the

voices that tell us we need to keep some people separate as outsiders? How abundant would life be if we truly believed that we are so intimately known by God that she calls us by name and loves us as beloved children created in God's own likeness?

Christ calls us out from our comfortable spaces to follow his voice toward this type of abundant life. Not abundance in the ways of the world, but abundance in the ways of God's unfettered love, God's vision of a true kin-dom, a world in which God's peace, God's shalom is lived and experienced by the entirety of Creation. May it be so. Amen.