

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
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April 13, 2008  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 2:42–47; Psalm 23  
1 Peter 2:19–25; John 10:1–10

Imagine this scenario with me. A husband and wife are walking down the hallway of their local church toward their son's Sunday School room to pick him up before going to worship. They see him standing outside the room, leaning up against the wall.

Together, they enter the room and are met with something that they had not expected. Their son's Sunday school teacher lashes out at them, and in no uncertain terms tells them that their son quite simply was not allowed to return to Sunday School.

Shocked by her statement they listen to her concerns. Yes their son is hyper and rambunctious, but they never expected that things would come to this.

Let's talk to the pastor, they think. Their hearts sink as they hear him too say that their son was not welcome in Sunday School. In addition, the pastor voices concerns over whether they should reconsider having their son begin confirmation in the fall.

Imagine ... being invited to leave the church. While we may not have experienced that particular situation in our lives, we need to try and imagine what that experience might be like as we hear the gospel lesson for today.

You see, today's lesson follows on the heels of John's recount of Jesus' healing of the man born blind, which we heard just a couple of weeks ago during Lent.

As you will remember, the man born blind had been healed by Jesus and then interrogated repeatedly by the Pharisees before they drove him out of the synagogue.

At least according to the gospel of John, Jesus' words we hear today are the final ones of his public ministry. He begins with a parable that, quite frankly, those hearing it and just simply don't understand.

In our world, with possibly just a few exceptions, we just don't have much experience with sheep, shepherds and shepherds, even thieves and bandits. And if we get tangled up in the imagery that Jesus uses, we just might, like those that originally heard his story, simply not understand.

So let's start at the beginning. Again, imagine with me that you are the man Jesus healed (or the young boy and his parents from my earlier story) and you have just been told that you can no longer be a part of your faith community. And, having been told that, how are you feeling? What words of comfort do you want to hear from Jesus?

Or imagine that you are the Pharisees (or the Sunday School teacher or the pastor from my earlier story). You've just basically been told by Jesus that if you say **you** know the way to God, that **you** have the knowledge that **you** need to ensure your salvation, then you are blind and wallowing in your sin. What words do you want to or need to hear?

The young couple left their meeting with the pastor, feeling rejected, angry and, yes, a little embarrassed. The car ride home was tense. The conversation included questions such as: So, is this the way that God treats people who are different? Is this the type of treatment we can expect from a Christian community? If it is ... then we are probably better off going it alone.

Although directed specifically to the Pharisees who didn't understand Jesus as the long awaited Messiah, through the parable, Jesus reveals, a descriptive picture of how God comes to meet us in this world – in our sheepfold, if you will.

Jesus' words describe the relationship that we all have with God our creator – a relationship that is

- forthright,
- built at a personal level with each one of us,
- and one that involves patient leadership based on great abiding love.

God enters into relationship with us – his sheep – forthrightly ... right through the front door. God doesn't climb over the wall or sneak into our lives. God isn't like the thieves and bandits that Jesus describes. Instead, God comes into our world in Jesus Christ ... who is the door through which we all enter into relationship with God.

The relationship in which we enter with God isn't a generic one. Instead, it is a relationship built on trust – like that between the shepherd and the sheep. It is a relationship that begins when the shepherd calls each of us by name – in our baptism – as we are called “child of God”. And we recognize that calling voice as one in which we can place our trust.

And our trust is placed with a leader, a shepherd, that patiently leads each one of us. Yes the shepherd does bring us together into the protective nature of the sheepfold. But he doesn't leave us there ... although it might make things easier if he did.

Just think about it, wouldn't it be easier for the shepherd to simply gather the sheep behind the tall stone walls of the sheepfold, behind the iron gate at which a guard is posted, and leave the gathered sheep in there to live isolated from the thieves and bandits who lurk in the shadows trying to hunt them down and devour them?

The original purpose of the sheepfold was to provide the place that the shepherds would gather their sheep during the night for their protection. In fact, there would be many different flocks gathered in the same sheepfold and they were all guarded through the night.

Then, in the morning, the shepherd would come to the sheepfold, call out to his particular sheep, who would hear his calling and follow him out to the pasture to feed.

Like the shepherd calling out to his flock, Jesus calls out to each of us ... by name ... and leads us out into the world ... into the pastures to be fed. Jesus' leading is not a corralling through force or might ... but a patient one that calls us initially, waits on us when we are slow to respond, misses us when we stray and seeks us when we are lost.

And in doing so, Jesus Christ reveals to us a loving God that calls, waits, misses and seeks each and every one of us.

That young couple I introduced you to earlier spent many days wandering, straying and yes trying to go it alone. Their faith was shaken ... to its very core. They wandered off, looking for greener pastures themselves.

But, by the grace of a patient God who doesn't force us out just because we are a little hyper and rambunctious, doesn't abandon us when we wander off, but instead patiently waits for us and keeps calling us by name ... they didn't stay separated forever.

They not only came back to the sheepfold, but were also welcomed back into the loving arms of a God who accepted the responsibility for getting them, and each one of us, brothers and sisters in Christ, into the pasture that is abundant life.

That young couple's experience is one that I hold dear to my heart ... for you see ... I was that young father of that hyper and rambunctious boy. And that fateful day, thieves and bandits took my faith in a loving God from me, at least for a moment.

But because God is our faithful, patient shepherd, that seeks us out when we stray, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we were all brought back into the sheepfold. And so it is with you, brothers and sisters in Christ. Called by name, we are **all** led out to the pastures ... out into life ... all of us ... including my hyper, rambunctious son.

Thanks be to God. Amen.