

“SHEPHERDS, SHEEPDOGS, AND GATES”

Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

April 17, 2005

Gospel Lesson: John 10:1-10

You know we all want to belong, and we all want to be safe, and we all want to move in a trustworthy direction, and we all want to end up with God. As I was thinking these thoughts, I know that retired pastors and their families, and we have many here in this congregation, will understand what I'm going to say. Pastors' families don't really belong anywhere. We, as I said earlier, are sheepdogs for Jesus the good shepherd. We follow orders, and after a few decades, I know that we look back, and we see that our hometowns have changed, and each pastorate has changed as the new sheepdog came to town, and we are left with children who have bits and pieces of emotional ties here and there, and ultimately, nowhere in particular, except the church. Now, I'm neither bragging nor complaining, but in a real way, more than halfway through my ministry, I realized that, as I have answered the call to go wherever God sends me, God has become the only constant. God has become my shelter, my shepherd, my home in the midst of a waterfall of faces and places passing by at increasing speed and increasing volume.

Older folks have always told me as you get older, time speeds up, and I said, “Yeah, sure,” and now I say, “Sure, it does.” My personal answer to where do I belong has increasingly become, with God. Where is my home? With God. What direction next? Toward God. Who can lead me? God in Christ, God's spirit, God as good shepherd. As I said before, I am not the shepherd, I am the sheepdog, following orders. One more question, who is good? Who is good? God. I'm a dog. A sheepdog, but still a dog. We all decide whom to trust, whom to follow. When we decide to trust and follow mere men and women, or symbolically, other sheep, we have a third question, can I ignore all the inconsistencies and illogic and convenient lies in order to follow this man or this woman? That's a question we don't like to ask, but we should.

It has been my consistent observation that when people join some group or another, some party or another, some fashionable movement or another, they have to make a conscious decision to ignore all the inconsistencies and illogic and convenient lies they make and at the same time, pounce like fierce sheep on all the inconsistencies and illogic and convenient lies the opposing groups make. All human movements and all human would-be shepherds do the same. Lift high self and group identity and seek to destroy the other side. Jesus as a shepherd is quite different. He lived what he talked. Even in the face of violence and opposition against the established powers of church and state at that time, he stood firm. Against insults and threats, he made no compromise, and he gained no personal power. He gained no wealth. He pointed to God. He trusted God. He followed God even though it cost him his life. If you find an earthly shepherd, who lives what he teaches or she teaches, and stands firm against church and state, against insults and threats, and makes no compromises in order to gain personal wealth or to gain personal

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power, if you find an earthly leader who points toward God and trusts God even though it costs popularity or his life, if you find such a leader, you have found someone within whom God’s holy spirit is working.

Emmie asked me when I told that story – you may not have heard about it or heard me say it to the children – about the dog that jumped in front of the alligator last week and saved the woman’s life, but the dog was eaten, she asked me, she said, “Well, you know, you’re the sheepdog of the flock here, would you do that, would you do that for me? Jump in front of an alligator?” I said, “No, but I’d give you the best funeral this church has ever seen!” And I’m sorry Emmie wasn’t here to hear this.

But if you find someone who speaks this way to this crowd and that way to that crowd, and compromises for safety, and compromises for wealth, and compromises for comfort, or power, or prestige, you have what the Gospel calls a “hireling” and we all are in danger of becoming that. Perhaps he or she uses God’s name, but cares nothing for the safety of the sheep, caring nothing for the high shepherd who is God, working for the money, and folks, there are better ways to make money!

I was in a Baptist church one time because the girl I was dating was Baptist, and in the middle of the church service, right in worship, right after the first hymn, they called a church meeting, and they voted the preacher out. They did! Right as I was there! Now I notice it’s already printed in the bulletin that I’m scheduled to do the benediction so I’m here for the day. One of the charges beyond something about the choir director, apparently it’s always something about the choir director, was that, now this is one of the charges, and it comes from the scripture, was that he was a hireling, was that he was a hireling. Those were the harshest words that they could use, that he really did not care about the sheep. Worse than being a hireling who truly does not care for the sheep is being a thief who tries to ignore the gate that God has put in place. The gate, the door, the way, the truth, the life is none other than Jesus Christ, and so entering by some other way is the symbolic offense of entering the sheepfold, but not really accepting that God was in Christ, making peace by the blood of his cross. In the language of this reading, it is worse than being a hireling, to pretend to be one of God’s sheep, following Jesus Christ as shepherd, and not recognize Jesus’ voice. Not recognize that he is the gate, the way, the truth, the life. It seems to say that it is worse by far to seek the safety of Christian fellowship, but ignore the gate of Christ, the high shepherd who gives life, who gives his life. It might be preferable to stay out than to try to sneak in and join without joining in your heart. It might be preferable to stay out than to pretend to follow Jesus Christ, but never really follow him in your heart. That seems to be the word about the hireling and the thief, and the bigger word that sheep need is a shepherd, and I have heard of fierce

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dogs, and I have even met and have the scars to prove I have met some fierce cats, but I have never heard, never, of fierce sheep. I cannot imagine a warning sign, big red letters, “Attack Sheep!” No, sheep need the safety of a shepherd to guide and corral, and they need boundaries around them to keep them together. Part of the safety for the sheep is staying together and not straying off on your own.

I like the book entitled, Lessons From a Sheepdog, by Phillip Keller. The idea is, and this is where I got that idea, that there is only one shepherd, and that is God in Christ, and I and other pastors are like loyal sheepdogs. A sheepdog under orders. A sheepdog who knows the boundaries and knows the shepherd and follows orders. I am free to repeat what I have received, but not to make it up. I am free to guide in the paths already trod by the good shepherd, Jesus Christ, but not to strike out on my own. I am bound by Scripture and tradition. I have no other authority, no other calling, no right to strike out and lead sheep into unknown territory because I think it’s a good idea. I am merely a sheepdog. God in Christ is the good shepherd, and I seek to echo his voice, to reinforce his boundaries, to lead in the direction of God the Father, which the good shepherd has underlined in red in his life. Yet, it pricks our pride to be called sheep. And there is no anger like the anger of someone whose pride has been pricked. It pricks the pride of many to be called sheep even though if you look around, fashion dictates and advertising successes prove it to be true. No matter how much our economy depends upon the fact that we are followers, we do hate to be called sheep and to have it told to us from the pulpit.

One of my seminary professors told a story about a preacher, who compared his congregation to a flock of sheep, and a man named Horace was incensed by the preacher’s remarks. He circulated a petition demanding that the preacher apologize or resign over the matter of calling people sheep. He gathered enough signatures so that a meeting of the official board was called, and as soon as the meeting was called to order, Horace shot out of his seat, and said, “Preacher, don’t care much for being called a sheep.” A little old lady in the back stood up, thank God for little old ladies, and said, “Horace, it’s better than being called a donkey, which in your case would be true.”

It is astounding what some people will do to pretend to be above the herd. It is astounding the things that people will ignore to pretend not to need others, to pretend not to need a shepherd, to pretend not to need God. It is just as dangerous as a sheep striking out on her own. There are no fierce sheep. There are no safe, solitary sheep. We will identify with some group, and we will follow some shepherd, and we will amass some way to feel safe in a dangerous world. The questions are, will it be God’s group, will it be God as good shepherd, can life be safe for anyone without boundaries and gates?

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As we've studied Proverbs in the last two weeks on Wednesday night, I was reminded that the word fool, the description of a fool in the Wisdom literature is those who think they are wise without God. Fools are those who think that the boundaries apply to other people, but not them. Fools are functional, self-serving atheists, who do whatever they wish without regard to others and without regard to God. It says in the Proverbs, “A fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’.” A fool pretends to need no membership in a flock, no shepherd to guide, no God.

Another story I can identify with is of a minister in a brand new appointment in a country parish. He attended the county fair with his brand new folks, and he was told that his predecessor, that his predecessor, had always entered the hog calling contest, and won! How we love to be compared to our predecessors. Anyway, he had always entered the hog calling contest and won, so they asked him if he would like to give it a try, and he said, “Well, when the Lord and the bishop appointed me to serve this church, I thought I was called to be a shepherd of the sheep, but you know your people better than I do.” Anyway, if you don't like being called a sheep, you'll have to take it up with God. The symbolism is throughout the Old and the New Testament, and I'm playing it as it is dealt.

In a former church, I preached with a huge image of Jesus as good shepherd right behind me in the stained glass. It's Grambling Church above Spartanburg. In that image, Jesus is holding, he is carrying, he is rescuing a lost sheep. Think of how easily we fall under the spell of the greener grass, of things being advertised, being sold to us. Think how we are sold things we never thought of wanting until they told us we would be smarter and cooler and more successful and more attractive and irresistible and younger if we would just buy it right now. What are you waiting for! Operators are standing by! A Main Street member told me this, he said in sales, and he may be here today, he said, “I can make a living selling people what they need, but I can earn a fortune selling people what they want.” Our culture creates many wasteful, foolish desires, and then we like sheep, after we get it, and we begin to suspect that maybe we're not smarter and we're not cooler and we're not going to be more successful, and we're not more attractive, irresistible or younger, I have known some people who will go back and read the advertising one more time, and try to rekindle the faith in the product that they've lost. Maybe they're not taking enough! Maybe they need to double the dosage! We don't want to admit that we've been herded by sales pitches. So we become sometimes a co-conspirator, deluding ourselves that the product or the party or the philosophy or the movement is what it says it is in spite of evidence to the contrary. Think of how easily and how deadly folks entice us to wander off in matters of faith. It does happen, more now than when I first began in ministry. We often confuse, in this country especially, freedom of religion with equality of all religions. Not all belief systems are the same. Not all belief systems teach the same vision of God or the same destination or have the

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same boundaries or values. Many a religious con man or con woman has taken advantage of our God-given spiritual hunger and our human herd mentality, and led folks off into outrageous belief after outrageous belief, or to financial ruin, and as we have seen in the past few decades, even to death. We think we're too smart to be influenced, and yet commercials work. We think we are too informed to be swayed, and yet politicians promise and smile, and we forget year after year after year. We think we could never get sucked into a cult or some sort of a para-Christian sect, and so did those upper middle class professionals, who killed themselves ten years ago, seeking passage on a UFO, which they believed was just behind the Hale-Bop comet. Some of these folks were engineers. Maybe that's not a good example. I know we have a lot of engineers. I'm teasing. That was ten years ago. Or 30 years ago, the Jonestown mass suicide with Jim Jones, or the suicide bombers today, who expect personal and eternal physical reward for bringing death in God's name. That happens almost everyday. Our confidence that we, we can never be led astray is our weakness. Our confidence that we are more observant, that we are smarter, that we are better informed, is our downfall. Our faith in ourselves can do us in. Jesus warns we need a shepherd. It is not faith in ourselves that saves us, it is faith in God in Christ, the good shepherd, and where he leads me, I will follow. We say this, and we sing this, but so often, we do not bother consulting God at all. We go where we choose, and we do what we choose, and we value what and whom we choose. Imagine how silly it would be for a sheep out in the dangerous wilderness to think to himself, “You know, I'm a pretty self-sufficient sheep. I'm gonna go where I want to go from now on, and do what I want to do from now on. I will make my own choices from now on. I'm not going to consult the shepherd at all.” I think that particular sheep would get very lost, very fast. Knowing we are sheep, we listen for and follow our master's voice, without it, we wander off to our own harm. Without Jesus, we could not know the heart of God, the love of God, the forgiveness and grace of God, and yet we go about our merry way pretending we are self-sufficient, needing nothing outside our own personal heads and hearts to lead us, taking paths and never looking back to see where the shepherd might have led us instead. You know, when you think about it, when you remember, you know where your wandering desires got you in the past. You remember. Pray for God's guidance and for what is best for others, for the safe sheep and for the lost sheep and for everyone concerned, we are all in this together. Pray to know what is best for you and to follow. Of all the voices crying out for your allegiance and mine, God in Christ is the one you can trust, even more than your own wandering desires, God is the voice you can trust. We have all tried it our way. Jesus says, “My sheep hear my voice and follow.” Listen for his voice and follow. Now, you may end up in some amazing places, and it may not always be easy, but ultimately you will end up with whomever you trust and whomever you follow. Jesus, the good shepherd, is the way, the truth, the life that leads to God and leads out to others, leads to abundant life here and to eternal life beyond. Follow the voice of your good shepherd to safety, to abundant life and eternal life. Amen.