

May 7, 2017  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter  
John 10:1-10; Psalm 23  
Acts 2:42-47

### **BE PART OF THE FLOCK**

A few weeks ago, Danny Dieth, the pastor at Christ Presbyterian, and I were the guest speakers for the Thursday night program at UKirk—fka the Presbyterian University Center. It was the last regular Thursday night program of the academic year. We weren't exactly asked to speak. Trinity—the current Chaplain, had asked the students to submit some questions they had about faith, Christian living, the nature of God, or just about their own faith journey. Fortunately for Danny and me, she sent us the questions ahead of time so we could be thinking about how we might respond. There were a lot of good questions!

We knew we'd have to narrow it down. The idea was that Danny and I would share our thoughts and then hopefully the students would join in the discussion. We narrowed it down to six questions, thinking we wanted to keep the program under 1 1/2 hours and that would allow 15 minutes per question. I think we actually got to 4. It was a lot of fun. I was amazed at the thoughtfulness of those young adults and how articulate they were grappling with some complex theological issues.

One of the questions was apropos of our readings today and today's kick off of Stewardship season. It was: do you have to be actively participating in a congregation in order to be a faithful Christian. Danny and I were in synch with our reflections: the short answer is yes, being a faithful Christian means you are active in the Church of Jesus Christ. Or, stated the other way around: unless there is something beyond your control that prohibits you from being active in a particular church—something like

imprisonment or disability—you can't be a faithful Christian unless you are actively involved in church.

I expected some push back on that from the students. I know for a fact that most of them are not active in a congregation while they're in college and among those who are, the activity is pretty minimal. I expected to hear "you don't have to go to church to be a Christian." Or, "I can worship God without going to church on Sunday morning. I can worship God on the beach or out walking in the woods." These are things I've heard many times from not so young adults. Usually, it's people my generation who were brought up in church, are very firm that they are Christians, but haven't been active in a congregation for most of their adult lives. We've talked about the statistics before. Something like 75% of Americans self-identify as Christian. But something like 20% of Americans are actively involved in a church.

But I didn't hear the college students trying to defend the idea that church commitment isn't necessary to Christ commitment. Instead, the conversation veered toward a discussion about the fact that there are many people their generation who don't go to church because they have experienced rejection, exclusion and judgment from the church and what we might do about changing that. It was the kind of conversation that just gives you hope for the future of the church.

So, what does it all have to do with our Scripture readings today? Everything. All of the readings, Acts, Psalm 23, the Gospel lesson, are about the necessity of Christian commitment to Christian community. It simply isn't possible to live the Christian life, to follow in the ways of Christ, without being part of a church.

In the Gospel lesson, Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. The good shepherd who calls his sheep and his sheep recognize his voice and they follow him.

Sheep of course are herd animals. They live in flocks. They are not solitary. They aren't out wandering around on their own listening for Jesus' voice. And the shepherd isn't out wandering around the hills speaking to his sheep individually. He speaks to them where they are gathered.

Jesus also calls himself the gate. Notice, he is not the gate keeper. He is the gate. The entry-way into the fold. He says: ***9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.*** He isn't saying it's ok for individual sheep to decide if they want to be in for awhile and out for awhile. He's not saying the individuals can come and go as is convenient in their busy lives. He is saying those who are in the fold, will know safety and security at night, together. And those who are members of the flock can go out, together, to find pasture.

Jesus is an open gate for all who want to follow him. The thieves and bandits try to get in by hopping over the rails instead of by coming through the gate. Those who want to steal the sheep must avoid the gate. The thieves and bandits are not foreign sheep, or misfit sheep, or sheep that look or behave differently from those inside the fold. No. all sheep are welcome.

The thieves and bandits are false prophets and false teachers who were running rampant in the early days of the church, and of whom there is no shortage today. They might be the Prosperity Gospel preachers who say it's OK to take money from the poor members of the flock in order to buy multiple, multi-million dollar mansions and private jets. But they also come in the form of seductive advertising for everything from cars and boats to expensive shoes and watches to designer clothes. Thieves and bandits are those who tempt Jesus' sheep to abandon their flock and thereby abandon

him. Thieves and bandits are all the things that call us away from abundant life in Christ even as they falsely promise a material, worldly kind of abundance.

It's a God thing that we have this passage, and the passage from Acts, and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, as our Scripture readings as we begin our time of intentionally examining what it means to be this congregation called Fellowship. Because that is precisely what Jesus is talking about here. He is talking about the abundance that comes from being part of a flock who hears his voice and follows him. This is where we hear him best. This is where we meet him in the bread and wine as we gather together. This is where we are nurtured, fed and protected so that we can go out into a world of green pastures, not dark valleys. This is where we make our choice and our commitment to be part of the church of Jesus Christ. Or not. It's our choice, but being part in and part out is not one of the options. Let us give thanks for God's gift of faith and the faithful living we share together in this time and this place called Fellowship.