



Stories from the Body of Christ with Todd Seifert

Published April 29, 2020

Since Easter, I've been taking part in the daily readings and devotion in the book *Catch Fire in 50 Days* by Blake Busick and Christie Latona, who are from the California-Nevada Conference of the United Methodist Church. Its focus is on parts of the gospels and the first 13 chapters of Acts, all meant to immerse the reader in the story of how the church became a movement that started the process of transforming the world.

And that's our mission, isn't it? To make new disciples of Jesus Christ so, through their relationships with Christ, combined with those of current believers, we can transform our broken world?

I think that's the case. As I prepared to fill the pulpit this week at my wife's church, Central United Methodist Church in Lawrence, I was really convicted by the lectionary text this week from John, chapter 10, verses 1-10.

I'd like to read that for you now, from *The Message*, by Eugene H. Peterson.

Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it."

<sup>6-10</sup> Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

Let's be clear to start off: The Message is a paraphrase, not a word-for-word translation of the scriptures. But I like using The Message in this context: When it comes to telling the stories, The Message puts the narrative in "plain English" so we can understand it better.

Jesus is telling a story here to help his audience in the first century and us today better understand. In it he tells us some profound truths about salvation — freedom through Christ — and about our role in that salvation, both for us and for others.

We have roles to play in this story.

So I have two questions for you today (and you'll be sick of these questions by the time we're through): Which character are you now? And which character do you earnestly long to be?

## **Setting**

First, we need to understand the setting of this story. It's a sheepfold — or a sheep pen. We often have these views of shepherds tending sheep in open fields or on mountainsides — under the big sky or the vast array of stars and the moon.

But what was more likely the case is sheep were tended to in the open air by day, so the sheep could eat while the shepherd could keep watch over them. But at night the sheep were often driven by the shepherd into a cave or back toward a village or homestead.

I have a photo on my website — [toddseifert.com](http://toddseifert.com) — of a ruin that shows what likely was the foundation of a house next to a stone fence. This wouldn't have been exactly like what Jesus was talking about, but it's the best illustration I could find to show a pen that adjoins a home.

They aren't separated like you would see on an American farm today, but rather joined together, with the home making up one of the walls of the fence.

Shepherds would have brought the sheep back home, to safety, at night.

That's the illustration Jesus is painting for us in this story. Bringing sheep home for safety, in his presence.

## **Characters**

Now that we have a vision for this scene, let's look at the players in this story.

One is settled for us. Jesus tells the story, but seeing that his audience wasn't quite grasping it yet, he comes out and tells them that he is the gate. The sheep must pass through him to get to safety, for eternity.

That leaves three other major characters: The sheep themselves, the shepherd and the bandits (or thieves).

Which are you now? And which do you want to be?

It's kind of a trick question. You see, we all have dual roles. We all have one role as sheep. The questions I asked of you have to do with that second role: Are you a shepherd or a bandit? And which do you want to be?

Let's look at the story again.

- The sheep are coming home, seeking refuge.
- The shepherd, the person guiding them, walks up to the gate to gain entrance for his flock. He encounters the gatekeeper — a person with a bit part in our story, so we aren't going to cast him or her. The shepherd is well known both to the gatekeeper and the sheep. We know that because Jesus explains the gatekeeper opens the gate willingly, indicating these two people have a relationship. The sheep also know the shepherd. They have been around him or her enough to recognize their voice. The shepherd knows the name of each sheep — it's a two-way communication and a mutual relationship.
- At some point, though, there is a threat. Jesus makes note of a person climbing over or through the fence instead of going through the gate. This bandit is called a "sheep rustler" in The Message paraphrase. Various translations of this passage use words like "thief" or "outlaw" or "robber" or "vandal." Jesus says, "All those others are up to no good."

So, we have a good shepherd and we have thieves. And remember the two questions I asked of you: Which are you now? And which do you want to be?

Good shepherd vs. thieves. Seems like an easy decision.

But do we understand what those two things mean? Or like Jesus' audience, do we need further explanation? Each of us can say "I'm a good shepherd," but God knows if that's a true statement. We have to do a little self-reflection to see if we may be lying to ourselves.

Good shepherd or thief: Which are you now, and which do you want to be?

## **Good Shepherd**

Luckily for us, Jesus — the Good Shepherd (capital G and capital S) gives us a good explanation of what it means to be a good shepherd (all lower case). If we were to continue on in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, Jesus shifts gears a bit and puts himself in the role of the shepherd. He says this:

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own sheep and they know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. I give up my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen. I must lead them too. They will listen to my voice and there will be one flock, with one shepherd."

The good shepherd knows his sheep and they know him. In other words, the good shepherd builds relationships with a flock. And like it or not, we all have a flock — family members and friends, neighbors and colleagues we come in contact with (or at least we did before the pandemic and we hopefully will again soon). These are the people we get to know in a number of different contexts, be it work, school, while hanging out in the back yard or taking a walk in our neighborhood. It might be the people on the golf course, in the coffee shop we frequent or in the break room at work. These are people with whom we've built a relationship. They listen

to us, and we listen to them. There is a mutuality of respect built with effort, sometimes over time.

Building relationships is a must for a good shepherd. And this means going beyond the cursory relationship of knowing their name, maybe a spouse's name and perhaps their favorite college basketball team. It means to truly "know them," the kind of relationship that when things get really heavy and troublesome, they know they can count on you.

In other words, when that wolf enters the field, putting them in danger, do they know you well enough to seek you out for refuge? Being a good shepherd means you can be counted on to provide a shoulder to cry on, a word of encouragement, and maybe — just maybe — an invitation to learn more about who Jesus is and how he can open the gate to eternal safety through a relationship with him.

That can be a daunting job by itself, but there's even more. Jesus says, "I have other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen; I must lead them too."

In other words, the people we must build relationships with, get to know and support with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness as followers of Christ are not all like us. They are people who don't live in our mostly white, middle-class neighborhoods. Their skin may be a different shade than most of ours. They may not know where their next meal will come from or where they will sleep tonight. They may not speak English as their primary language. And most importantly, they may not know the life-saving grace that comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

How many of those people do you know? I admit I don't know enough. To be a good shepherd, by Jesus' definition — which is the only one that really matters — I have to do better.

How about you?

## **The bandits**

None of us wants to see ourselves as the bad guy. And though sheep rustling probably was and is a "thing," we need to get to the heart of what Jesus means when he uses this illustration. I think Jesus was saying less about actual thievery and much more about what it means to be a bandit.

When I was a kid, my dad watched a lot of John Wayne westerns. And that means I watched a lot of John Wayne westerns. That was particularly the case on Saturday afternoons in the winter. There was always a rustler or land baron or thief. And as I reflect on those characters, they all had one thing in common: Greed.

That's what Jesus is pointing out for his audience when he talks about the person who chooses not to go through the gate — through Jesus — to get to the sheep. It's a person who is putting themselves first, in front of the welfare of others. In this case it means the person doesn't have the best interest of the sheep at heart.

This is where the truth gets tough for a lot of us. We all want to see ourselves as the good shepherd, but as we've discussed, it actually takes a lot of work to play that role. The bandit, however, well, nobody wants to see themselves in that role, but it's one we so easily fall into. We get concerned about ourselves. And it's easy to understand why. We have concerns. We have responsibilities. We have struggles that we have to deal with every day.

But so do the good shepherds — and yet they put their sheep first. In terms of people, that means good shepherds put others first, even to the point of laying down their life for another. I

pray none of us are ever asked to lay down our lives for another, but we most certainly will be asked to make sacrifices for others, and I don't mean our loved ones. It's one thing to make a sacrifice for your children or for close, lifelong friends. It's quite another to make a sacrifice for someone whose plight you have only just heard of briefly or who you might not ever meet or hear of at all.

We have to be willing to be a bit uncomfortable to do the job of being a good shepherd because being a good shepherd is hard work. Being a bandit is much easier. It can be humbling, but do you see yourself as the bandit in Jesus' story?

## **Who you want to be**

So, good shepherd or thief: Which are you now? And which do you want to be?

So far, we've focused on the first of those two questions. I suspect that as you study what we've shared today and as you read John 10 for yourselves that some of us — perhaps many of us — are eating a pretty good helping of humble pie. It's eye-opening to come to grips with the idea that we are not living up to Jesus' expectations of us. I know that was the case for me as I wrestled with this text.

To truly serve Jesus means we must bring others to the gate, to the Savior. But how?

To be a good shepherd, we have to train to be a good shepherd. We can't simply pick up a shepherd's staff, walk out to a field of sheep and immediately know what we're supposed to do. After all, the lives of those sheep depend on us.

Likewise, we can't as Christians walk out into the mission field unprepared and do what we must for Jesus in the world today. There are too many souls in this world who depend on us. Like I said, this is a tough job. But it is a rewarding one.

As part of our Lenten journey, our church together worked through "The Walk," a book about spiritual practices by the Rev. Adam Hamilton, lead pastor at United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. Among those practices are:

- Reading scripture.
- Spending time in prayer.
- Serving others.
- Attending worship.
- And giving generously.

Those are great practices to consider daily by yourself and together as a small group or church. They will prepare you for your role as a good shepherd.

One thing the pandemic has taught us is that we can't continue to do things in old ways. We must do some new things. Maybe some of those spiritual disciplines I just mentioned are new to you, at least in terms of daily practice.

At our church, my wife, Rev. Amy Seifert, is going to lead us through some Biblical stories over the next few weeks, tales about how God led people from old ways — ways that had them putting themselves first, without the best interest of their sheep or their personal flocks at heart — into new possibilities.

God proclaimed through the prophet Isaiah:  
"Look! I'm doing a new thing;  
now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it?"

I'm making a way in the desert,  
paths in the wilderness."

A new path — perhaps that new path is for you, you as a good shepherd for which to lead your flock of followers to the gate, to Jesus.

Good shepherd or thief: Which are you now?  
But most importantly, which do you earnestly want to be?

Something to consider this day. Amen.

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