

The I Ams of Jesus: The Gate and the Shepherd

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Rev. Peter Jonker

John 10:1-18

I was an English major in college and my professors at Calvin struggled mightily to teach me and my classmates to write well. The professors taught us all sorts of rules for good writing: Rules like: avoid run on sentences, use active verbs whenever possible, and prepositions are not for ending sentences with. ☺ One of my professor's writing rules came to mind as I studied John 10. My professors always told me, never mix your metaphors. Switching from one metaphor to the other, from one image to another, in the middle of a sentence, or even in the middle of a paragraph, is extremely bad form. A metaphor is a picture or image used to describe something else. "The sea was a mirror." You use the image of a mirror to conjure up the picture of a perfectly calm sea. A mixed metaphor is a sentence that uses two conflicting images thus creating confusion. For example: I smell a rat here, but I'm going to nip it in the bud! That girl stabbed me in the back, and she did it right under my nose! Gentleman, our proposal is set in stone, the only question is, will it fly? Mixed metaphors are confusing.

I thought of mixed metaphors this week because John 10, this well-loved passage contains a mixed metaphor. I've always loved this passage. It has some of the most wonderful, comforting statements in scripture. Especially those good shepherd verses. But while I've always loved the passage, I've also been confused by it, because in the middle of his teaching Jesus switches images! This chapter begins with a little parable. Jesus tells us about the shepherd who leads his sheep in and out of the gate of the sheepfold, unlike the thieves and robbers, the sheep know the Good Shepherd's voice. Jesus' listeners don't understand the parable. So, in verse 7, Jesus starts to explain it. It's an extended explanation that has two distinct parts: verses 7-10 and then verses 11-18. It's here, in the explanation, that the metaphors start mixing. First, in verse 7, Jesus says, "*Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.*" And then, to make sure you haven't missed it, he says it again in verse 9, "*I am the gate, whoever enters through me will be saved.*" And so you think, "Ok he's given me the interpretive key, If I read the parable and think of Jesus as the gate, I'll understand what he's trying to say to me." But then, just three verses later, Jesus changes it! He says, "*I am the good shepherd.*" And just to make sure you don't miss that he says it again in verse 14, "*I am the good shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*" This is confusing! This breaks all my English professor's rules! Which is it? Is he the gate or the shepherd? How can he be the gate of the sheepfold and the shepherd who leads the sheep through the gate? I can't get my head around that! It's a mixed metaphor.

What do we do with this? How do we understand it? Rather than accuse our Lord of poor grammar, I would like to suggest that perhaps not all mixed metaphors are bad. I would like to suggest that, despite what your English teachers taught you, in some cases a mixed metaphor is exactly what we need. John 10 is one of those cases. Let me try to explain why.

Imagine that you are in a time of spiritual and emotional weakness. There's something going on in your family, or something going on in your job that is bigger than you. You think about it all the time. You aren't sleeping well. Maybe you just went through a divorce and you feel a sense of shame and failure and loneliness all mixed together. You're supposed to start again but you just don't know what to do. What do you need in that worried state? The first thing

you need to know is that there is a good shepherd. You need to know that there is someone who will care for you, someone who knows your name, someone who will carry you through.

Here at LaGrave, starting at 4 years old and going through third grade, our children go to children's worship. Children's worship is not Sunday school: it is worship with its own age appropriate liturgy. At the center of the worship is a Bible story. As they go through the program, the children hear many Bible stories, but the very first story that a child hears when they enter the program is the parable of the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd is the foundational story of the program, and the children hear it multiple times as they go through the program. There's a good reason why this story is foundational. In my previous congregation we used children's worship too. One of the really experienced children's worship leaders there was Carol Christians. Sometimes, for our staff devotions, she would tell this story. It was wonderful. Here's how she told the story. She would take out a parable box and lay out the scene. She would start with the pasture: a large green circle of fabric. In the pasture she laid out the rest of the parable with other pieces of fabric. She would mark the square of the sheepfold. In the sheepfold she would place the sheep. Over here would be a blue patch of fabric: the quiet waters. Over here there would be some dark, jagged patches of fabric: places of danger. She would lay down a road that came from the gate of the sheepfold and went out past the quiet waters and then through the places of danger and then back again to the fold. Once the scene was set, Carol would take out the figure of Jesus and she would say, *"Once there was a person who said such amazing things, and did such wonderful things that people began to follow him. But they didn't know who he was. So one day he said, I am the good shepherd. I know each of my sheep by name, so when I call them from the sheepfold, they follow me."* *"Sometimes I show them the way to good green grass, and to cool still water."* And she would move the sheep up to the peaceful place and Jesus would be with them there. *"And when there are places of danger..."* And Carol would move first Jesus then the shepherds among the dark rocks, and leave them there for a moment... *I show them the way to pass through."* And she would slide first Jesus and the sheep slowly through the rocky place and all the way into the sheepfold, *"...so they can come to the sheepfold and be safe at home."* At the end of the story, after travelling through the dark places the sheep would be in the sheepfold with Jesus. She would conclude the story by asking the wondering questions: *"I wonder if you've ever had to go through a place of danger? I wonder how the sheep feel when they are with the good shepherd? I wonder how the good shepherd feels about his sheep?"*

It was such a powerful devotion. Simple and childlike, but it also gave the assurance that we all need to hear. If you are 5 years old and worried about your sick dog, you need the comfort of the good shepherd. If you are 45 years old and worried about your marriage collapsing, you need the comfort of the good shepherd. If you are 85 years old and facing your death, you need the good shepherd. Think about it: not only do we start our 4 year olds off with the image of the good shepherd, at funerals; what psalm do we turn to for comfort more often than any other? Psalm 23. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. We start our lives with the promise of the Shepherd's care, we finish our lives with the promise of the Shepherd's care, and in the middle of our lives we need the promise of the Good Shepherd's care every single day. It's foundational.

But while that promise is the foundation of our faith, it is not sufficient. Let's go back to that recently divorced person, struggling with anxiety, struggling with the loss and failure and loneliness. If I am going to counsel that person as a pastor or even as a friend, the first thing that person will be the promise of the shepherd's care.

*“Don’t be afraid.
The Good Shepherd loves you.
He walks with you.
He will never leave you.
He will bring you through this and he will bring you home.”*

But if that’s all I ever say to my hurting friend, I’m letting my friend down. When we are in trouble, the first thing we need is comfort and assurance, but we also need to know what to do! The person trying to recover from a divorce wants to know, ‘How do I start to forgive my ex after what he did to me?’ ‘How much of a relationship do I have to have with him?’ ‘How do I talk to my children about the divorce?’ In our struggles we first want to know that we are loved and that we are held. But then we need to know what to do.

Here is where the gate comes in. The shepherd is an image of love and care and acceptance. The gate is an image about finding the right path. It’s a metaphor about learning where to go and where not to go. Don’t follow one of those thieves and robbers who will lead you to death and destruction, enter through the gate and you will find the path of abundant life. It’s similar to Matthew 7 where Jesus said, *“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life.”* So, when Jesus says to us, “I am the gate!” He is saying, “I am the one who can teach you the path of life. I’m the one who can tell you the way you should go.”

Jesus is the gate and Jesus is our shepherd and we need to know both of these things. If all we have is the promise of his shepherding care, the danger is: faith becomes a big warm hug and not much more. Jesus becomes your big, non-judgmental friend who never questions your choices, instead he just gives you a big hug and tells you how wonderful you are. That’s the way of cheap grace. If all you have is the gate, Jesus becomes the heavenly rule giver: shouting instructions at you, standing at a distance with his hands on his hips watching you as you fail, shaking his head in disappointment. Yelling at you like Bobby Knight on a bad day, “C’mon man! What’s the matter with you! Pick it up!” That’s the way of the Pharisees. We need both these things. We need the amazing grace of Jesus the root of our lives. We need it every single day. We also need to know what to do. We need the Lord to teach us his path. Jesus is both the shepherd and the gate. Is it a mixed metaphor? Yes it is. Is it confusing? Absolutely. It’s mysterious. It’s beyond our thought and understanding. But it is full of good news.

And it’s not the only mixed metaphor actually, the New Testament is full of them. It’s one of the Bible’s favorite ways to show us the incomprehensible breadth of God’s love to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Here’s just a few others: Jesus is the temple. He is the house in which we find refuge. But he is also the High priest who presides in that temple, who welcomes us in and invites us to sit down for dinner, and when we sit down we find that he is also the food of our salvation. The house, the host and the food. How can he be all three things? It’s a beautiful mystery. Jesus is our judge. He shall return to judge the living and the dead. But he’s not only the judge, on the bench, he’s the accused! He’s the one who takes the sentence we deserve. How can he be both judge and condemned? It’s a beautiful mystery. Jesus is the baby born in a manger, a person just like us, tempted in every way we are tempted, weeping at his friend’s funeral. But he is also the eternal Son of the Father the second person of the trinity who is before all things and in whom all things hold together. Eternal unmovable God and a weeping man on his knees. How can he be both things? Put them all together and you realize that these are more than mixed

metaphors; they are holy mysteries. We don't fully understand them, we take shelter in them, and by them we are saved.

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