



## “Free-Range Sheep”

*Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg*

*May 7, 2017*

*John 10:1-10*

It is really hard to catch a chicken. When we lived in Atlanta, our across-the-street neighbors had one of the biggest fenced-in backyards on the block. In that backyard, they had a chicken coop with chickens who free-ranged and roamed around in the grass during the day. They only used their coop at night to lay their eggs and to sleep while receiving protection from predators. My girls would often visit the chickens, chase them around the yard, and feed them scraps of vegetables and fruit.

Well, a couple of years ago, this urban-farming family had to make a move to Germany for a new job. They couldn't take their hens with them so the Gregg family came to the rescue (with some reluctance from Daddy) and adopted the flock. But we had to relocate them across the street to our newly built coop. We found all the supplies we needed: a dog carrier, towels, some chicken treats, a whole lot of confidence...and attempted to bring the chickens to their new home. Remember how I said it is really hard to catch a chicken? They knew the voices of their old family but didn't have a clue who Amanda and I were. It took us two days, several jokes about frying the chickens, and a bunch of scratches and bloody, pecked toes before we wrestled and eventually resettled Henrietta, Primrose, and Pecky into their new home.

Just like catching chickens, this Gospel reading eludes my grasp and confuses me. The terms and ideas are ancient and there seems to be an Abbott and Costello style explanation of the characters:

Are we the sheep?

Yes.

Is everyone a sheep?

No. Some are robbers and thieves.

Oh. Well, is Jesus the sheepfold?

No. But he's the gate.

He's the gate?

Yes.

Then who is the gatekeeper?

Jesus.

So, then who protects the other parts of the fence?

Jesus, because he is the Shepherd.

But I thought you just said Jesus was the gate and the gatekeeper.

Right!

I'm so confused.

Part of my confusion is the terminology in this text is somewhat unfamiliar to me (we raised chickens, not sheep) so I looked up a description of a sheepfold to get better acquainted with the images Jesus was using. In biblical times, a sheepfold was a rock wall enclosure of loosely stacked stones that provided protection against "thieves and robbers," wolves, and other animals of prey. Often several shepherds shared a communal sheepfold to contain multiple flocks and they employed a gatekeeper who would sit and watch the entrance to the fold during the night so that predators couldn't come in and sheep couldn't get out. The shepherd was deeply interested in every single one of his sheep. They were usually counted each evening as they entered the fold, but sometimes the shepherd dispensed with the counting, for he was able to feel the absence of any sheep. With one sheep gone, the shepherd felt something to be missing from the entire flock. In the morning, the shepherd would call his sheep and the flock would exit the fold because they knew the familiar voice.

When H. R. P. Dickson, a diplomat in the Middle East in the early 1900s, visited the desert Bedouins he witnessed many events that revealed the amazing knowledge which the shepherds had of their sheep. One evening, shortly after dark, an Arab shepherd began to call out one by one the names of his fifty-one ewes, and was able to pick out each one's lamb, and restore it to its mother to nurse. To do this in the daylight would've be nearly impossible for many, but this was done in complete darkness, in the midst of the noise coming from the ewes crying for their lambs, and the lambs crying for their mothers. This image of intimate knowledge of a flock is reinforced by Jesus' saying, "I am the Good Shepherd, and I know my sheep."

It is clear that the role of the shepherd is to lead the sheep, provide protection, give freedom from fear, and offer fulfilling sustenance. The notion of a Good Shepherd was important for the followers of Jesus right after his death. They needed the reassurance of a life-giving community. The history of this Gospel text is that the community was afraid. They were being persecuted, marginalized, and killed. In the Gospel of John, the author's central theme was the importance of abundant community. He wrote of the community who unbound Lazarus; the community as vine and branches; and the community as an untorn net pulling in all varieties of fish.

After Jesus's death, the scared followers, the ones huddled behind locked doors unsure of Jesus's presence as prophet and protector, were sheep without a shepherd. They felt that they had lost their community. The early followers needed a relationship with each other and with Jesus that could support and build up their growing group. The early church needed Jesus. We, too, need a life-giving community. We need a faith community where we can bring our fears and questions. We need to find fellowship and communion with other wanderers on the journey. We need to feel safe and secure. We need a Good Shepherd.

But at what cost? You see, this is what gives me pause with this scripture. I am concerned about the exclusivity in this text. I'm concerned about those left on the outside of our sheepfold. From the inside the sheepfold feels loving, safe, and inclusive, but from the outside it can feel exclusive, hurtful, walled-off, and marginalizing. We keep the walls of the sheepfold intact because they give us a sense of security. But here's the thing - the sheepfold doesn't ultimately make us safe. Those who want to hurt us can climb over. The gate doesn't make us secure. It can be unlocked or left ajar. There will always be dangers.

Walls give those inside a false sense of security and exclude those on the other side. And that's not who Jesus was. That's not who we are. We can never reach the ideal fields, life-sustaining waters, and justice-filled world if we don't break free from the sheepfold and trust that as followers of the Good Shepherd, we are not only known and loved, but also allowed the openness to bring water, bread, light, and communion to all people - robbers, thieves, the weak, the lost, the broken, the hurting, and the hopeless. What might it be like to live in a world without sheepfolds? What might it be like to reimagine what community looks like? In a time when new walls are being built to separate and divide us, what might it be like to tear down the walls of our sheepfold, break apart the gate, and realize we don't need a gatekeeper? What might it be like to follow Jesus out into the world?

It is my hope that we won't hide in huddled fear but open ourselves up to life-giving community. It is my hope that we might encounter the true freedom for all of God's people and all of God's creation when we trust ourselves to the Shepherd's voice. And even though the shadow of death might surround us from time to time, I hope we will choose to move with grit and with grace to encounter a world that needs us and yearns for the Shepherd we follow.

Let us be free-range sheep and rely on the voice of Jesus, the one who says all will be healed regardless of our ailments, all will be protected regardless of our skin color, all will be loved regardless of our backgrounds or beliefs, all will be welcomed regardless of our gender identities, economic statuses, countries of origin, or intellectual or physical abilities. All are part of God's free-range flock. And we are to be like our Good Shepherd, learning each other's names, our histories, and our stories so that we can grow a community that is diverse, all-encompassing, and all-loving. We are a people who trust the Shepherd to allow us the freedom to roam, to explore the world, to listen to people of other faiths, to share meals with our enemies, to bring friendship to the lonely, and to locate those who need comfort.

Let us go out with the Good Shepherd to spread goodness, acceptance, joy, justice, compassion, love, and peace. Let us be like a flock of roaming sheep, sweeping through the land, following the Shepherd into the world with hope and with confidence. Let us go with the freedom to do good, speak power to injustice, grow the flock, and help all people thrive in our communities. Let us no longer be cooped up. And then maybe, just maybe, as we follow the Good Shepherd out into the world, we will end up becoming free-range sheep.

Amen.