

**May 3, 2020**  
**“The Voices We Follow”**  
**John 10:1-10**  
**Rev. Amy Emmett-Rardin**

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One of the lovely effects of being home so much is that, one day, Gabe and I blew the dust off his old wooden roundhouse and train tracks and built a full layout. We spent hours with these trains and tracks when he was younger, and, for me, it was bringing back those sweet memories as his amazing imagination played with the toys anew.

It won't surprise those of you who know Gabe, that he found a role for some small stuffed animals. And he also came up with this idea of pretending that the trains were running to and from a gem mine, carting loads of immeasurable worth and wonder. That sent both of us into drawer after drawer to find small, shiny items that could fit in the little trucks and be carried to the stop. We took turns loading and unloading the cars. The one unloading got to sort all the “gems” into like-colored piles. Really satisfying if you have even a touch of OCD!

All human beings, OCD or not, have a strong tendency to organize, seek safety through order. We like to sort, categorize, define, choose, set boundaries. It helps us feel some measure of control, which helps us feel safe.

With Thomas the Tank Engine playtime or your utensil drawer or medicine cabinet, this is benign but pleasing. However, human beings don't stop with just organizing our home or work spaces. We sort, categorize, define, choose and set boundaries well beyond that: acceptable/unacceptable, safe/unsafe, in/out, us/them.

Christianity has been used to do this, time and again—to categorize, define, choose, set boundaries. Jesus is especially interpreted this way, often using the “I am” statements in the Gospel of John: “I am the bread of life (6:48) . . . I am the Light of the world (8:12) . . . I am the true vine (15:1) . . . I am the way, truth, life (14:6) . . . (and in today's passage,) I am the gate.” In some strains of Christianity, this is central to understanding God and all of reality. Jesus is understood as the one and only path to God, to truth, to life. This leads, most often, to rules of behavior that define whether you are in or out, part of us or part of them—sorted, defined, chosen. Doesn't it feel good to be in the sheepfold, with the Shepherd, all safe with the walls around us?

I get that instinct. It's the type of Christianity that I followed, fervently, in an earlier time of my life. I had a lot of social anxiety as a pre-teen and teenager . . . and as a young adult and mid-life adult! Being part of a church group felt like belonging, like being part of a secret group that had inside knowledge over and against the rest of the scary world. God's special ones, who tried to live right and were promised

protection. I was raised in a church that created a vision of us/them, of Jesus as the focal point of a pretty exclusive club. It was open to anyone, yes, but you had to hear the right stories and profess the right words and live by a pretty set list of behaviors to truly belong in the sheepfold.

This tendency toward rigid dogma didn't start with Western Christianity, of course. This is the debate we see repeated between Jesus and the Pharisees. That is whom he seems to be talking with in the John text for this morning, having, just before chapter 10, tried to debunk the Pharisees belief that a man is born blind as punishment for his parents' sins. Many religious folks in Jesus's day are portrayed in scripture as centering their lives around rules and tradition. There are firm answers and rituals, clear right and wrong . . . sorting, choosing, defining . . . clean/unclean, in/out, us/them.

And though it is very prevalent, as I've said, to also hold up Jesus Christ as part of this order – the way, the light, the gate, the one and only, when I read Bible stories of the life of Jesus, that's not what I see or hear. To my understanding, Jesus teaches, by his living example, that orderliness is not the center point. He seems fluid and flexible, not rigid and predictable. Jesus' life and ministry disrupts rigid tradition, time and again—hence all the conflict with religious leaders.

He observed religious holy days, but not in the expected ways. He certainly did not observe established social/religious boundaries, consorting with the unclean, the "out", the "them". He had influence and made impact, was a leader who taught and healed but, instead of ascending in power, he'd slip away to a quiet place with a few ragged, unglamorous followers.

So, Jesus portrayed as shepherd of an exclusive group, walled away from the world, that image, for me, doesn't jive with the Jesus stories.

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)

The point of the shepherd in this morning's story, anyway, isn't one who stays huddled with just a small group of sheep behind stone walls. This shepherd, "leads them out, by name" (verse 3). It's actually not a portrait of sheltering in place in your own in group, it's about discerning which voice to follow when you head out to the wider pastures.

If formal rules and guidelines and observances are not the center point, however, if orderliness isn't the path to abundant life, how do we find our way?

Verse 4: "The sheep hear the shepherd's voice . . . the sheep follow because they know the voice." Following the voice of the shepherd means leaving the sheepfold and practicing deep listening, on each path, through every day. Discernment—

that's what we're talking about. Discernment. Not only in big decisions, but the spiritual practice of seeking to align with God's spirit of love and life . . . every . . . single . . . day.

This is a more risky, less predictable, more fluid, less rigid way of living. It's harder to define than a creed or list of commandments. And it is never over. We never arrive. This is a lifestyle, a never-ending, unfolding, dynamic process that we dance with, throughout our lives, if we so choose. How we practice discernment, daily, well, there could be a hundred other sermons about that, about how we listen and discern the voice of truth and love, in the midst of so many voices clamoring for our attention and energy.

In case you don't quite get what I'm saying, consider the voices: the voices of political parties, relatives, bullies, teachers, friends, advertising, social influencers. Know those voices inside you? Some of them you thought you left behind, in junior high or the old neighborhood?

The voices of fear, anxiety, grief, voices of planning, commitment, celebration. Know those voices too? There are a lot of voices clamoring.

Verse 4 again: "The sheep hear the shepherd's voice . . . the sheep follow because they know the voice." That's not always easy in this world of noise, and we are way more complicated than sheep. So, again, how might we discern truth and love in the midst of all the freaking noise?

Here it is in a nutshell.

1. Everything we need is already available.
2. It takes some quiet and stillness, with personal reflection to make space for listening.
3. And, we need trusted companions on the journey.

Some of what we can turn to, some of what is already written on our hearts, comes from scripture itself:

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God . . . is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress . . ." (James 1:27)

"The heavens are telling the glory of God; the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge." (Psalm 19:1-2).

“Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of complete rest for the land . . . ” (Leviticus 25:3)

“ . . . faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

“ . . . love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: . . . love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-38)

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10)

I'm no longer a “traditional” Christian, but the ethics of love and justice that inform my sense of self, my values, that I try to follow in making my choices are completely informed by the example of Jesus.

In story after story, Jesus responds to the person or situation right in front of him. He has eyes to see people, ears to hear their stories, a heart flexible enough to pause and discern a response of love and truth.

For me, increasingly, then, following the voice of “the Shepherd” means trying to open my heart and spirit more, to the unpredictable but trustworthy movement of God's loving spirit. More openness, honesty and grace with myself, more openness, honesty and grace with others, more commitment to advocating for the vulnerable, be they animal, plant or mineral.

Listening deeply might look like sitting still and quiet or journaling, or listening to a piece of music or to the birds, or taking a walk in the woods. Listening deeply might be pausing to notice my racing heart or the frenetic energy running up and down my legs. Listening for God might include pausing, for a breath or two, to notice someone else's downcast eyes or clenched fist or nervously bouncing foot.

What may Love be revealing, or inviting? Is there work here for me to do? Is there work for me not to do here. Is there space I need to step back and leave? Am I be invited to rest . . . or speak up . . . or stay with . . . or bow out . . . or grieve . . . or rejoice?

We could go on and on about how discernment is lived out. And, actually, we do. That's why we gather, here, with those faithful companions I mentioned a while ago. That's what this community is, faithful companions. Listening, seeking, opening to love and light and truth. Supporting one another on this journey. We come here, and

maybe it is a bit of a protected sheepfold for those of us drawn to this community. But we don't stay here. We go out, into the pastures, the alleys, the highways of our lives.

Hearts, minds, eyes, ears open to the unpredictable, uncontrollable movement of life, we risk being challenged, stretched, burdened, bruised in ways that we may not if we stay behind the walls of the sheepfold. And some days, let's be honest, that's what we need. But every day, we have choice . . . after choice after choice, to listen for the voice of grace and invitation: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

The gospel offers a picture, a promise, a path for life abundant: dynamic, surprising, stretching, fluid, unscripted, open-hearted, thoughtful, present-in-each-moment, seeking the path, co-creating the path of Truth, of Justice, of Love.

Dare we follow? May it be so.