

The tenth chapter of John's gospel is not one of my favorites. Why? The first thirty verses out of forty-two in the chapter, are all a really heavy metaphor about sheep. First, Jesus calls himself the shepherd who enters the sheepfold by the gate and calls his sheep by name and leads them out, and they follow him because they know his voice.

"I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. And I lay down my life for the sheep. So there will be one flock."

Then we come to today. The Collect says Jesus is the good shepherd. The Psalm is, The Lord is my shepherd. The text from Revelation says, "the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd." And in the gospel, Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."

To our ears, all this talk of sheep might be a little much. We know that sheep are not famous for either their intelligence or initiative or even cleanliness. And Our Lord is calling us all sheep. The comparison between us and sheep is not just strange to us. In verse 6 of chapter 10, John in fact says, "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

But there it all is, much talk of sheep, so what are we to make of it?

First, when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," he could easily have said, "I am the good king." That would have been more in line with Jewish expectations of a messiah, someone, especially of King David's lineage, who declared himself a king. Instead, we get a messiah who calls himself a shepherd.

In Jesus' day, shepherds were sometimes treated as outcasts. They were considered unclean, likewise anyone who came into contact with them.

Shepherds were not allowed to be elders or even witnesses in court. And now comes Jesus saying, "I am the good shepherd." That was the image that he chose to ascribe to himself. Why?

Partly, there is a wealth of references in OT tradition. But in addition, if there is one recurring theme that runs through all the great religions and philosophies, and that Jesus exemplifies, it is humility. A renunciation of grandness; a state of spiritual being that swerves away from pretense.

For religious and moral philosophies from Plato to Buddha, to Francis and Benedict, many of whom were in fact aristocrats or noblemen, humility is the beginning of virtue, just as pride is the original sin. Pride separates us from grace, and humility is the opposite of pride. It opens us up to grace.

In *THE BOOK OF JOY*, by the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu, they list Eight Pillars of Joy. In my view, they mistakenly list humility second, after perspective, but perspective and humility are not terribly different.

Second, Jesus says, "I know my sheep." The most amazing thing about God for me, what makes him God, is that he knows all of us individually. He knows every one of our particular situations and experiences and concerns. He knows us not as a flock, but personally. He knows everything about us.

Third, Jesus said, "There will be one flock." Revelation this morning says, the great multitude will come "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages."

Sheep are not called to love one another. We are. In John ch 13, Jesus tells his disciples, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

So three chapters after all the business about sheep, Jesus lays out a big difference between them and us. He alludes to it when he says, "I have other sheep." The kingdom that is coming will be multi-racial, multi-sexual, multi-everything, and we are to embrace it.

All the distinctions we make now won't matter in the Kingdom of God. A God just for people like us is only a tribal God, and therefore not God. A God who is really God loves all of us, because he made all of us.

The gospel today suggests another way in which we should be different from sheep. We know that sheep are easily herded and managed. They are passive. We are not called to be like that, like laundry falling down the chute. Jesus says, "The works that I do testify to me." That is, I am what I do. So are we what we do.

John the gospel writer also wrote the three letters of John. In I John, he wrote, "if our hearts do not condemn us, if we are not faint of heart, we have boldness before God."

So courage is another difference between us and sheep. Our Lord often spoke of courage. When he told the disciples not to hide their lamp under a bushel basket, he was telling them not to lose their nerve.

We remember the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount, blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers and so forth. But the only Beatitude Jesus says twice is the last one:-- Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake; blessed are ye when men shall persecute you for my sake.

Jesus expected his followers to be persecuted on his account, and he wanted them to have courage. The gospels are full of times when his followers are terrified for one reason or another, and an angel shows up, or our Lord appears, and says, "Do not be afraid."

If something is happening that is just wrong, it is not our highest calling to be sheep. That is not what Jesus wants; he is calling instead for a kind of advanced placement Christian faith, one that goes far beyond compliance and acquiescence. Our Lord, after all, was not only persecuted; he was crucified.

There may be a time coming for us that will be a test, when we will have to have courage. Our great encouragement then will be that, at the end of it all, and in God's good time, it will all be sorted out, and we will see in each other the face of our Lord.

Jesus says, "No one will snatch them out of my hand."

God be praised. Love your neighbor. Amen.