

George Swenson

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hopkinton, NH

April 30, 2023 – Easter4(A)

In the gospel reading today Jesus tells us about two types of people that will try to lead the flock. He says that “anyone that does not enter through the gate” is a thief and a bandit. Those people come to kill and destroy rather than to help the sheep to live abundantly.

In contrast, the shepherd is the one that cares for the sheep. This shepherd knows all their names and they love the shepherd enough to follow them out of the pen. The shepherd enters through the gate and the gate keeper lets them in to be with the sheep.

And this whole image was really easy to grasp for me until Jesus goes and says that he is the gate.

WHAT?... I thought you were the shepherd??

But if Jesus is the gate here, then who the heck is the shepherd? And who are the thieves for that matter? So many other places, including other readings assigned today imply that Jesus is the shepherd. He even says it a few short verses after claiming to be the gate. It's no wonder that the apostles are always confused. Jesus doesn't make a whole lot of sense if here he is claiming to be the gate for the shepherd to enter through but also the shepherd. To say I spent some time going in circles trying to pin this reading down is an understatement.

Maybe we shouldn't start with asking who is the shepherd but instead ask ourselves what does it mean to be a shepherd. I am not talking about a historical context. More like what does it mean to us, in the 21st century, to be a shepherd. And regardless of time period, any good understanding of shepherds should start with sheep.

My father-in-law has sheep of his own. Not a whole flock, only five currently but expecting another one any day now. He didn't start out with that many though.

In fact the plan was only ever to have three and that is where he started. But before we knew it, we found out one of the sheep was expecting. So, with very little time before the arrival, we did a lot of research into how to care for a pregnant sheep and a newborn lamb.

One thing that kept coming up in this research was that when sheep are born, they need to consume about 10% of their body weight in a special kind of milk the mother produces called colostrum. That is a lot and for that reason sheep have a fairly high mortality rate early on. So when the sheep gave birth to a little lamb, my husband and his dad had to put a lot of work into it to make sure that it was nursing often enough going as far to bring the lambs head up to the utter and show it where to find its food.

To keep things even more interesting, about a week later the other female sheep unexpectedly gave birth in the pen where they graze.

When my father-in-law called, the baby had yet to stand up let alone nurse which was not great. So we rushed over there and set out to work. My husband was helping my father in law with adjusting the setup of the stalls in the barn to accommodate a separate space for yet another mother and lamb pair, and I sat down in the pen.

Now something you should know about me is that I am not a get your hands dirty kind of guy. I'm not a big fan of dirt or grime and never have been. So up to this point I had been moral support and helping fetch things but touching freshly born farm animals was not on the list of items I was going to do. So I cannot tell you what came over me to make me sit in this pen with this lamb and start petting and talking to it while it was sitting there in the hay. But that is what I did.

Ever so slowly, I started to pick it up and set it on its feet to try and encourage it to stand next to its mom so it would be able to reach the utter to nurse. I did this over and over and it stood there a little better each time.

After a little while, when the stall in the barn was ready, we brought the baby and the mom inside hoping that being in a closer space would make it easier for the baby to get to the mom without her walking off.

Has anyone here ever milked a sheep? Well until this day, I had not either.

But since I had been sitting with the baby, it had gotten used to me. It wasn't fazed when I approached or handled it. So I got the honor of being the one to try and get it to nurse. I put my feelings about how incredibly gross this was aside and with one hand on the udder and the other guiding the lamb's head, I got to work trying to get the lamb to nurse. And after a while, with many frustrations and near misses, we made progress.

I know, great sheep story George, but what does that have to do with being a shepherd? Well, I learned there that being a shepherd has less to do with carrying that little-bo-peep crook thing and more to do with the state of caring for a creature that needs you. It is all about putting your own desires aside to tend to the flock. Even when that means stepping outside your comfort zone.

In this way, yes, Jesus is the shepherd in this parable. But the two images here are not mutually exclusive. Jesus is also the gate. To enter the flock through this gate is to live into Jesus' call to love each other as He loves us. He has shown us how to be a shepherd and invited us to follow, through him, to be shepherds in this story.

Sometimes that means we have to put our love for our neighbor ahead of our desire to be comfortable. That could mean helping people that need a safe place to stay through volunteering with Family Promise. It could mean working to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. It could mean having the difficult conversations about race and injustice, even across differences. Even simply reaching out to the lonely and the isolated so that they know they are loved.

Each and every day, we have the opportunity to choose to be a shepherd for the flock around us. Jesus is waiting to open the gate, we just need to step through.