

John 10:1-10 - Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (NRSV)

Jesus is addressing a contentious group of people in this text. There have been great arguments between several factions of Jews – indeed among the disciples themselves - as to who Jesus exactly is. You see, there had been a lot of people claiming to be the Messiah, the savior of Israel over the past 100 years – and many had gone to their deaths at the hands of Roman and Temple guard swords for following these leaders. So it was a very valid question to ask. “ How can we trust Jesus? Is he really from God or simply some new charlatan in town?”

These listeners to Jesus weren't even dealing with issues of Biblical interpretation, translation or cultural context, like we do, when we read and study Scripture. They were divided even after hearing Jesus, himself, speak, and in their own language....

So Jesus uses two different analogies to explain who he is to this mixed crowd of people.

In Kenya, where I served the church, the people of a village know each other's sheep and goats the way we might know one another's children. People know their sheep by name. Through the evening, you can hear villagers calling out names. Soon enough each family will have gathered all their sheep and brought them to safety before the dangerous night. The sheep won't respond to a voice they do not know. In the morning, even if all the sheep of the village have been penned together all night, only the sheep of a particular shepherd will follow his or her voice out to pasture. The others don't even lift their heads to acknowledge the voice.

Jesus says, *“He (the shepherd) calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”*

Jesus pauses - and looks around. It is obvious that not everyone in the crowd understands what he is trying to say. So he tells another story. This time Jesus goes beyond the language of shepherd to the language of the gate itself. It is not uncommon, when sheep are in the high pasture for them to be secured in the evening in some recess in the mountains formed by the rocks, with the rest of the enclosure being thick walls of prickly brambles. There is only one way out or in and the shepherd sleeps in that opening so that no predator can creep in.

Jesus tries again, “ **I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.** ”

Many of you may have not recognized the voice of Jesus calling to you at certain points in your life. Even though I knew the voice of Jesus from my childhood, I certainly wasn't listening to it in my 20's. Too many of those other voices – the ones Jesus refers to as ‘thieves and bandits’ had my attention. They were lovely voices, but I realize now how very selfish and hollow they were. We have all heard and at one time in our lives followed those voices. Perhaps we still all get lured by them still.

However, there was always another voice, one that called quietly. It did not promise fame or fortune or a 50 pound weight loss. It did not offer power or prestige or cheap botox.

Instead this voice this voice offered life – abundant life. Not in a material sense, but in the deep abiding knowledge of who I truly am. Of safe shelter, everlasting community and love.

If you are sitting here this morning, you have heard this voice as well. It would be much easier to stay home in bed, especially on such a rainy morning. Even if you came because we are honoring the choir this morning, there were just as many reasons to stay away. Just as many voices.

But no – you got up and maybe you got your family up and you all got dressed and grabbed some sort of breakfast and got everybody in the car and got here on time....

Because of that voice. All of you – everyone sitting here. Whether you realized it or not.

I want you to remember that voice as I move forward this morning. Recognize as that voice is speaking to you, it is speaking to everyone who is sitting here and in churches of all sorts this morning. But especially, I want you to hold in your vision that voice as it speaks to those who are sitting in pews in Presbyterian churches this morning.

This week marked the passage of the amendment to our constitution known as 10A. As Presbyterians, we are always reworking our constitution. This year we even voted on totally rewriting our constitution! For any changes to occur in that document, first the General Assembly has to agree on what those changes should be. That happens at the every other year meeting of GA. Once the General Assembly has approved a change (which happens with far less overtures than one might think), then over half of the Presbyteries must approve those changes for the amendment to become part of the constitution. There are 173 Presbyteries so 87 must approve.

We had our meetings on the amendments over three months in Philadelphia Presbytery. Both your pastors and two elders were at those meetings as commissioners. The Presbytery voted not to do the radical overhaul of the constitution, indeed it looks like that overture will not get the required 87 Presbyteries to pass it.

The Presbytery of Philadelphia did vote to pass 10a. As of this week, so had 87 Presbyteries. So the language in the constitution outlining the gifts and requirements for ordained service will say the following:

Standards for ordained service reflect the church's desire to submit joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life (G-1.0000). The governing body responsible for ordination and/or installation (G.14.0240; G-14.0450) shall examine each candidate's calling, gifts, preparation, and suitability for the responsibilities of office. The examination shall include, but not be limited to, a determination of the candidate's ability and commitment to fulfill all requirements as expressed in the constitutional questions for ordination and installation (W-4.4003). Governing bodies shall be guided by Scripture and the confessions in applying standards to individual candidates.

So what does this mean for the church as a whole and for us at Deep Run? First, it starts with stating that this is for those who hear the voice of Jesus and listen to it. It is for those who submit to this voice. It is only for those inside the fold, in the flock. It is only for people who have heard the voice of Jesus and found it calling to them in this place. People have joined this fold and who this church feels are called to office. This is not for outsiders trying to get in. This is for the faithful listeners who have been here all along. Amendment 10A begins with an unequivocal affirmation that ordained office will continue to be rooted in each deacon, elder, and minister's "joyful submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life."

In keeping with our historic principles of church order, each session and presbytery will continue to determine the suitability of individuals seeking ordination within its bounds. That means that you as the congregation of Deep Run will still choose who will lead here. I take that very seriously. I always have considered the work of the church officer nominating committee to be among some of the most important in the church. To that effect, our church office nominating committee is going through significant training. We already meet for one evening where all we did was study Scripture and how it applies to elders and deacons throughout the church and specifically how it applies to the Presbyterian Church of Deep Run.

In prayer we began to ask the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the long process of discernment as to who God is calling to serve as elder or deacon. This year all of you will have the chance to make suggestions to the nominating committee as to who you feel God is calling to serve. Those nominated go through a prayerful process to see if church leadership is a calling they hear as well. You, as the congregation, also have to vote on whether these are the individuals – the members – the fellow Christians following the voice of Jesus - that you feel are being called by God to lead the Presbyterian Church of Deep Run at this time. Then, the Session must also meet with and interview the nominees and approve the call before anyone is ever ordained or installed as an elder or deacon. This is how it has been for a long time. Sometimes we short-change the process – start just looking through the church directory to see which warm body might possibly say yes.....

This amendment re-affirms the importance of that whole process of discerning who is called to leadership. We don't have all the elders we should have at this time. But we have specifically not just tried to find any BODY to fill that opening. We have decided not to fill it unless we see that someone is *called* to fill it.

What does change? Supposed that we were in a Presbyterian church that had gay members in committed relationships. In my last church there was a gay couple who had been in a relationship with each other for over 25 years. They were deeply committed Christians who served God and the church in extraordinary ways. They were known and loved by all the members of Las Placitas. One even served on their pastor nominating committee. The difference now is that particular church can consider one of these devoted Christians for ordination and/or installation as a deacon or as an elder, *if all other standards for ordination are met.*

A Presbytery can now consider similar people as ministers of the Word and Sacrament within the PC(USA) , *if all other standards for ordination are met.* Trust me, having sat through many very stringent examinations on candidates for Minister of the Word and Sacrament in Presbytery meetings, these examinations will only become more difficult.

A letter from the leaders of the General Assembly to the congregations that was sent this week says it this way, *The debate about ordination standards has been a Presbyterian family struggle for much of the last three decades. We have sought to find that place where every congregation and every member, deacon, elder, and minister of the Word and Sacrament can share their gifts in ministry while, at the same time, the integrity of every congregation, member, deacon, elder, and minister is respected....*

... Reactions to this change will span a wide spectrum. Some will rejoice, while others will weep. Those who rejoice will see the change as an action, long in coming, that makes the PC(USA) an inclusive church that recognizes and receives the gifts for ministry of all those who feel called to ordained office. Those who weep will consider this change one that compromises biblical authority and acquiesces to present culture. The feelings on both sides run deep.

However, as Presbyterians, we believe that the only way we will find God's will for the church is by seeking it together – worshiping, praying, thinking, and serving alongside one another. We are neighbors and colleagues, friends and family. Most importantly, we are all children of God, saved and taught by Jesus Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit.

We hold to the strong affirmation that all of us are bound together as the church through Jesus Christ our Lord. "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all," Paul wrote to the Ephesians (4:5-6).

It is Jesus Christ who calls individuals to ordained ministries, and all those who are called to ordained office continue to acknowledge Jesus as Lord of all and Head of the church. It is this same Jesus Christ who is the foundation of our faith and to whom we cling. (<http://www.pcusa.org/news/2011/5/10/presbyterian-church-us-approves-change-ordination/>)

The full letter is available online or in the narthex. I will also send it out as a church email tomorrow. I waited because I wanted to speak to you first.

Some of us are hopeful and joyful about what the changes to our Book of Order might mean for the life of the church. Others of us are angry, or disappointed, and wondering where we go from here. The flock is very confused. We all hear Jesus saying the same things, yet we just cannot agree about what they mean. Just like in the text this morning.

As fellow preacher, Marci Glass says, *“We are quick to assign roles from this text. We think we know who the thieves and the bandits are, but that’s not what this text is about. Our brothers and sisters are never the thieves and bandits. They are, we are, always the flock. This text calls us to listen for the voice of the shepherd, even as we are scattered, divided, and unclear about where we’re being called.*

And here we are. Together. In the same room. Worshiping the one Lord, to whom alone we cleave and whom alone we serve. We are one flock. We are all, despite our diversity—because of our diversity—one in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who calls his sheep by name.” (<http://marciglass.com/2011/05/14/one-flock-one-shepherd/>)

We are not the Shepherd – nor are we the gatekeepers. We are the ones who listen for the voice. Leaving the flock is not the answer. It is dangerous to go it alone. So we stay together and disagree together and most importantly listen together to the one who gives life – abundantly.

The letter from General Assembly ends with this prayer: Let us pray it together – as one flock.

Almighty God, we give thanks for a rich heritage of faithful witnesses to the gospel throughout the ages. We offer gratitude not only for those who have gone before us, but for General Assembly commissioners and presbyters across the church who have sought diligently to discern the mind of Christ for the church in every time and place, and especially in this present time.

May your Spirit of peace be present with us in difficult decisions, especially where relationships are strained and the future is unclear. Open our ears and our hearts to listen to and hear those with whom we differ. Most of all, we give thanks for Jesus Christ, our risen Savior and Lord, who called the Church into being and who continues to call us to follow his example of loving our neighbor and working for the reconciliation of the world. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.