

Sermon notes: May 3, 2020 **Focus:** Good Shepherd - John 10 [Lectionary Texts](#)

Today is “Shepherd Sunday.” We sometimes call it Good Shepherd Sunday. When stories about shepherds come up, I visualize Christmas pageants and hear Psalm 23 involuntarily. Visions of stained glass windows of sheep dance in my head.

However, in the text itself, nobody really got what Jesus meant leading up to, “I am the good shepherd,” and maybe not after. At first he says, *the one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep*: which gets him dumb looks. So he tries another angle: “*Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*” In this second attempt, he is the “gate for the sheep.” Then comes the “I am the Good Shepherd” bit (just after today’s reading). Thinking about my own experience of shepherding, I can mark many challenging years as a young adult dealing with flawed shepherds.

Growing up: I had a parent who wanted to be worshipped as an enlightened dictator. He fancied himself a savior and shepherd to his city and the United States if only we would just follow his lead.

Moving to Houston: Within months of moving to Houston, I found a very intense Christian community that was a non-hippy Christian commune (sort of). I owe a debt of gratitude for the emotional connections built during this period, but the commune’s shepherd was a deeply flawed individual. It worked for a bit because he was uniquely gifted in helping people find self-acceptance. Trouble in paradise happened when people actually got healthy. He could not accept success that was independent of him and a tailspin soon followed.

Volunteering in a church a few years after the commune In this church, people would swoon over their leader (some still do). I learned some incredible lessons in leadership from him, but he *had* to be the smartest and bravest guy in the room. You also had to be a sheep relying on him as your shepherd. Like my other story, when people began to experience freedom - it hit the fan.

These are why I am not a big fan of the shepherds. I like my “shepherds” to be *gates* to the divine, and I am leery of enlightened pied-pipers. The best leaders I know lead and then get out of the way.

Gates

Sheepgates are better than the shepherds, in my opinion. My favorite gate story is dinner at the Raven Grill in 2002. The Rev. Henry Strobel, RIP, met me for dinner. I was high on theology before seminary and wanted some guidance. Unlike the previous three stories, Henry never tried to convince me how smart he was or how spiritual he was. He never needed to be smarter than me, nor more spiritual. (he was on both counts).

Raven Appetizer Lesson: love your in-laws before they love you.

He gave me the vision for how to be big hearted and brave with my soon to be in-laws, instead of my default of petty. I'm applying and benefiting from the appetizer lesson 18 years later.

Raven Entree lesson: Mother church doesn't love you.

I know that seems weird. But Henry wanted me to see the center of my life in God, not in the church, not circling around family, and not clerical success. At its best, the church is a *gate* and does not try to be the shepherd. The church is far from our highest hope, but it can be an excellent gate to God.

In addition to those experiences of the past, I also see a wealth of bad shepherding in our world today. No one but God is our hope - not enlightened shepherds, not great orators, not good commune leaders, nada.

In the 2020 quarantine my morning ritual these days is a long walk/ hike and the hours of podcast accompanying the sojourn. My playlist is full of the fragility of the humans who aspire to God shaped roles. These podcasts are full of pretend shepherds. Not that you asked, but some of my favorite anti-shepherd podcasts are:

American Scandal is a multiseason juggernaut that will give you hours of heartburn. My favorites are about Waco, Enron, VW, and New Vrindaban. A fake shepherd / corporate hero is always at the center of misery.

Bad batch and Sick are cautionary tales against doctor-as-good-shepherd. With doctors, we hope they will fix us and sooth our pain. We place them on a god-shaped-throne to our peril.

Conviction is a look at the “satanic panic” from my childhood. The series follows the journey of families directly impacted by the fever. Cops and therapists make bad shepherds.

At the center of this panic was a therapist (Lawrence Pazder) and his star-patient & satanic victim, Michelle Smith, who became his wife after he treated her. She would travel the country and recount horrors that *never* happened to her. Law enforcement was super willing to jump into the fray and jail people on zero physical evidence and for things that *never* happened. It’s an easily forgotten chapter of USA history except for the families still broken.

Shepherds open the door, then step out of the way. If a shepherd in your life can’t step out of the way, you have my encouragement to trust in yourself. Trust that God has given you the tools you need. You don’t need to hand that power to anyone. A core text of Tibetan Buddhism is ‘Lojong’ or the Lojong slogans (attributed to Atisha, an 11th century Bengali). My favorite Lojong slogan is: *of the two witnesses, hold the principal one.*

It’s a spiritual way of saying trust yourself. You are the principal witness for what you need. God has blessed you. Trust that you are led from within to find grace and peace. If any leader tries to convince you that your innate smarts are best entrusted to him/her - run. Of the two witnesses, you are the principal one. The good shepherd lives in and through you. **Todd**