

Faith Mennonite Church  
May 15, 2011 – Easter 4  
“Turn to Jesus, go with the Spirit”  
Joetta Schlabach

### **Sheepfolds, the shepherd and the gate**

*Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-11*

A couple weeks ago I went out to Galewoods Farm, where Melissa Hochstetler works, to have lunch with Melissa and get a look at the new spring lambs. It was a chilly day and they were all huddled inside the sheepfold, just across a divider from the spring piglets noisily nuzzling at their mothers for sustenance. A week or so later as I drove across Wisconsin, taking my mother to Michigan, I spotted several herds of sheep out in the meadow, with young lambs frolicking about. On most days, however, we urban dwellers don't often see sheep and I don't know that I've ever seen a shepherd—someone leading or following the sheep. It's a bit difficult for us to fully appreciate the image of God as a shepherd that we find in the familiar verses of Psalm 23, “the Lord is my Shepherd,” and in the Gospel of John where Jesus refers to himself as a shepherd.

But Jesus lived in a time when sheep and shepherds were ubiquitous. And in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel (chapter 34) we find that “shepherd” was not just a term for sheep herders, but also for people herders, Israel's leaders. And Ezekiel 34 makes it clear that shepherds bear full responsibility for the health and security of their flock. The verses we read this morning from John 10 are a conversation Jesus is having, not with the disciples, but with the Pharisees, those who are supposed to be the shepherds of God's people. This passage immediately follows a text that we read during lent: the healing of the man born blind. You may recall how that story ended with an ironic twist: the man who was blind can now see and the Pharisees, who do not want to accept the fact that Jesus restored the man's sight, are left asking: “Are you saying that we are blind?”

To this Jesus replied:

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 (10:1-6).

This was Jesus' “defense,” in the style of a strong offense. “I'm not coming in clandestinely,” he says. “I'm not luring people away to the hills to form a violent, revolutionary band” (of which there were many at the time). “No, I'm teaching in the middle of the synagogue and temple—in the middle of the sheepfold. I'm quietly healing and calling people to the truth and an abundant life in a voice of love and guidance that they recognize and feel called to follow.”

But the leaders did not understand what he was saying. So he tried a different tack:

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.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep (10:7-11).

Jesus knows the importance of a gate. The most secure sheepfold will not be healthy if there is no gate for the sheep to leave. Out at Galewoods Farm the sheep had an infection this spring that the farm hands were taking precautions to control. Melissa explained that the bacteria gets in the soil in the enclosed area. If the sheep were never able to leave that area, we can imagine how unhealthy it would become. At the same time, enclosures are important, to keep out predators, especially at night when the sheep and their shepherd are asleep. But the predators roam in the healthy, outdoor environment, in the pastures. The sheep must go into this place of potential danger if they are to find abundant grass for grazing.

We need gates. We need gates that can close and define limits in order to maintain identity, safety and health. And we need gates that open, allowing us to interact with the wider world, inviting others into this place of security and trust. And the name of our Gate is Jesus. Through the Spirit of the living Christ, we discern the scriptures that help us to understand what constitutes our identity, safety and the abundant life that Jesus spoke of. We learn that abundance is a gift of the Spirit, manifested in the quality of the fellowship we share, not in the accumulation of endless possessions. We learn that abundance is a simple meal of soup and bread shared by all, not delicacies for a few while others are hungry. We learn that abundance comes as we tune our ears to recognize the still small voice of God reminding us that God's grace is sufficient when cultural messages blare around us and pop up on our computer monitors telling us we need more, we must be better, and that our self-preservation and the preservation of our individual families is more important than the welfare of the entire community.

Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." The gate is open to us because Jesus loved in an ultimate way and gave his life for us. We will never fully understand this action and that is why we walk by faith. For 2,000 years the church has named this mystery as that which gives us abundant life. It is that self-giving life that we see blossoming in the early church, as described in Acts chapter 2:

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved (43-47).

On Thursday afternoon I drove down to Mountain Lake since I was invited to speak at a women's banquet at First Mennonite Church that evening. Earlier in the week Mary Harder from Emmanuel Mennonite Church contacted me to see if she might go with me since she had received an invitation from her step-mother to attend. During our travel conversation we somehow began to recollect about the day that Paul Wellstone died. Mary recalled that she was working at the Ten Thousand Villages store that day. She remembers how people came into the store saying that they needed to be in a caring place to grieve and they knew the TTV store would be that for them. She was at first surprised but then overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude for the way people perceived the store as a place that would welcome their grief and their tears. She said there was one additional time that happened: on the day of "shock and awe" when the United States began bombing Iraq. Again, she recalled, people came in, looking for a place of sanctuary, a sheepfold where they knew they would hear and recognize the voice of compassion and abundance when our country's leaders were marching us down the path of war and destruction.

We have been invited into the sheepfold, into the beloved community of Christ. We are called to follow our shepherd Jesus, as we gather here communally to listen to his voice and as he leads us out to the pastures where we live and work. This is an awesome calling! May we graciously bring others to the gate to experience the abundance we have come to know.