

**Sermon: The Lamb Shall Be the Shepherd**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

8 May 2022

Based on **Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30**

Context is everything, right? Our gospel story occurred during the festival of the Dedication which, in John's time, was still a new festival. Today, we call it Hanukkah. The feast recalls how God reclaimed Jerusalem and the Temple through the Maccabee's victory of both faith and force of arms some 200 years before. The Dedication signifies God's continuing presence in the Temple. Thus, maybe it's not a coincidence that Jesus was walking in the Temple on that winter day.

What is at issue in the Gospel reading are questions of blasphemy and faith, and these questions have persisted throughout Christian history and not always in a good way.

Chapter 10 opens with Jesus speaking to some Pharisees, telling them he is the *gate* for the sheep (1-10). Then he says that he is the *good shepherd* who lays down his life for the sheep (11-18). He said, "I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me" (17-18).

All of what he said divided the Pharisees and set us up for today's reading.

In this translation, they ask Jesus, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" Other translations say, "How long will you annoy us?" Are they wondering, or they are anxious? We could read this as a demand or a complaint but either way, they want to know who Jesus is.

Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe." So, it's not a lack of information but a lack of belief that has irritated the Pharisees, though I don't think they realize that that is their problem.

Then Jesus gave them a more elaborate explanation which turned out to be more than they wanted to hear. They are sheep of another fold; they don't belong because they don't believe. And as they will not believe, so they will keep asking.

What sets them off is Jesus' claim that "The Father and I are one." On the face of it, this is an incredible and provocative statement at best, and blasphemous and offensive

at worst. From the moment he said it, this statement and this passage as a whole have been perceived by and against Christians as proof of an exclusive faith tradition that prefers one group of people over all others.

The oneness of Jesus with God remains offensive to Muslims and Jews, not to mention the problems that a human being claiming to be a god could cause.

Does God prefer one faith tradition over another? Some people think so, and wars have been waged in an effort to settle the issue. How other traditions view ours is not entirely accurate, and that can be because of the way some Christians portray it.

Reading a passage such as the one we read today, people have been known to draw a line in the sand and say, if you're not in, you're out; let's fight!

It's not just Christians either. Hindus and Muslims have been at odds with each other for centuries. History is littered with religious conflict, and it settles nothing.

Last week, we attended a security seminar, officially titled 'Contemporary Issues in Securing Your House of Worship.' We picked up a lot of good information about current events, security issues, and the need to be aware. Plus, coffee and donuts.

The highlight of the day was a Zoom presentation by the chief of police in Colleyville, Texas, who walked us through the 9-1-1 calls and videos from the January hostage situation at Temple Beth Israel, followed by a Zoom call with Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker, who told us what happened from his point of view on the inside.

We gained new insights about human behavior from these two calls, and we'll be happy to share them later. But one I will share is this: Jesus taught us the two greatest commandments are to love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Rabbi Charlie reiterated this, and said that despite what happened, we all still need to live into our values and the call to love our neighbor. But he made a great point: one's neighbor meant those people in your tribe and in your village; people you know.

We're also called to love the stranger. In light of his experience, the rabbi said, yes, love the stranger but be circumspect in how we welcome them. Safety first.

A common theme of chapter 10 as a whole is Jesus as the true shepherd of one flock. The risen Christ *is* the Good Shepherd; he gives life to his sheep.

The connection between the Revelation reading and the Gospel this is: Jesus was and will be our shepherd. He will guide us to the springs of the water of life.

Is Jesus the Messiah? According to him, yes (25-30). Those in his flock believe him not just because he said so, but because his actions speak louder than words.

So, is it good or bad to be the sheep of another fold? What determines who belongs to Jesus is whether or not you listen to his voice and respond to it by following him. If you don't, you are free to go your own way; there are many paths to God.

John Chrysostom, the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, said, "If they do not follow Jesus, it is not because he is no shepherd, it is because they are not sheep."

On the more scandalizing issue of Jesus and the Father being one, what could Jesus have meant? Could he have meant it literally, that he was simply God in disguise, because if he did, then he would be the cause of endless debate and conflict, not just between Christians and Jews but between more than a few Christians.

Or, and this is my preference, did he mean that he and God, Father and Son, are one because Jesus is going about doing God's work? In that sense, they share the same will and by extension, so do we if we follow Jesus. This is not divisive; it's a way to live.

Hanns Lilje, a Lutheran bishop and member of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, wrote a book about Revelation after the war. About chapter seven, he said that 'the door of heaven is open, and a ray of future glory falls upon the world in its sorrow and its pain.'<sup>1</sup>

The Confessing Church stood in opposition to Nazi efforts to unify all Protestant churches in Germany into a single pro-Nazi church. And even though they never rebelled against the Nazis politically, some members of the Confessing Church ended up in concentration camps. Having lived through that, Lilje had enough perspective to write that the door of heaven is open, and that future glory will indeed fall upon the world.

And even though we are living in a time when the world is again experiencing sorrow and pain, Scripture tells us that we will walk though the valley of the shadow of death; that the LORD *is* our shepherd, and he is armed to the teeth; and that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives.

Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Lilje, Hanns. *The Last Book of the Bible*. Muhlenburg Press, 1957, 137.

