

# Gathered In

John 10:11-18

April 22, 2018

By

Rev. Jeffrey V. O'Grady

San Marino Community Church  
1750 Virginia Road  
San Marino, CA 91108  
(626) 282-4181 • Fax: (626) 282-4185  
*[www.smccpby.com](http://www.smccpby.com) • [smcc@smccpby.com](mailto:smcc@smccpby.com)*

All rights reserved. These sermon manuscripts are intended for personal use only and may not be republished or used in any way without the permission of the author.

To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

Today happens to be Earth Day according to the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. It also happens to “Good Shepherd Sunday” this morning, because the Lectionary involves the story of the Good Shepherd or “model” shepherd in John’s Gospel. It’s always a challenge to say something new about a very familiar text. There are all kinds of artist renderings of the image of Jesus rescuing some lamb that has wandered onto a mountain precipice with a threatening raptor flying overhead about to attack. Perhaps you have seen it and can picture it in your mind. The “Good Shepherd” is willing to risk his life for the sheep.

The business world has borrowed this metaphor of “shepherd” for its definition of a “leader.” All kinds of workshops, weekend retreats, self-help literature and so on educate us in the skills of leadership development and adult survival. Consultants get paid significant sums to pound leadership skills into people, and identify methods and strategies for corporate growth and advancement. Think about it. Everybody wants to be a leader. Nobody wants to be a follower – to be a sheep. Don’t believe me? How many times have you been offered an opportunity to participate in a seminar on how to be a good follower? How often do we instruct our children how to follow an effective leader? When was the last time you studied the art of followership? The answer, of course: “Almost never!” And I suspect the attendance at any such event would be quite low.

Nobody dreams big dreams of being a follower. Nobody wants to grow up to be a sheep. Infomercials invite us to allow some self-help guru to develop our innate leadership skills. Once in a while, some concept like “teamwork” (usually defined as “everybody working together to do things my way”) might work its way into these lectures. But usually the goal of these events is to develop leaders, enablers, stand-up-in-front, stand-out-in-the-crowd types.

It's the season when college applicants receive admission notifications from schools across the country. Can you imagine college applicants highlighting in their essays their ability to follow others? No! Every student applicant is a remarkable leader with demonstrated ability to start a non-profit and change the world! The competitive nature of our educational system seeks leaders, those at the top of the class, with potential to be a difference-maker.

And the perception is that if I'm not able to rise to leadership status, then I'm like the illustration on the T-shirt. You may have seen the cartoon showing a team of sled dogs in harness. Each dog faces the rear of the dog in front of it, with only the waving high-tailed lead dog out in front with a clear view. The caption reads, "If you're not the lead dog, the scenery never changes." I bet no one here is immune to this leader-of-the-pack ideology.

Today's scripture asks me to get beyond all that. Do I want to be a shepherd? Well, all I have to do is die on a cross and rise in three days. Then I can be a shepherd. Far from saying that pastors are shepherds of flocks, John makes it clear that there can be only one shepherd of the flock, Jesus Christ. The qualifications are straight-forward. You have to get crucified, die, and rise again in three days. That's what it takes to be the shepherd of God's flock. And there's only one qualified candidate to serve as the "good shepherd." The rest of us, all together, are sheep. Pastors are, at best, Border collies, sheep dogs, nipping at the heels of the flock to keep them from going astray.

Sheep are really not dumb at all. That is just a bad rap spread by cattle ranchers. Sheep just don't behave like cows. You herd cows from behind, hooting and cracking the whip occasionally. But that won't work on sheep. Stand behind them, make loud noises and all sheep do it run around behind you, because they prefer to be led. You push cows but you lead sheep. Sheep will not go anywhere unless someone else goes ahead first, namely their shepherd, who shows them that everything's alright. All this emphasis on leadership development has isolated us from one another. We seem to be like sheep gone astray, especially our children. According to an article in *The New York Times* recently, "There's a mountain of evidence suggesting that the quality of our relationships has been in steady decline for decades. In the 1980s, 20 percent of Americans said they were often lonely. Now

it's 40 percent. Suicide rates are now at a 30-year high. Depression rates have increased tenfold since 1960, which is not only a result of greater reporting. Most children born to mothers under 30 are born outside of marriage. There's been a steady 30-year decline in Americans' satisfaction with the peer-to-peer relationships at work.

Former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy summarized his experience as a doctor in last September's *The Harvard Business Review*, "During my years caring for patients, the most common pathology I saw was not heart disease or diabetes; it was loneliness." Patients came to see him partly because they were lonely, partly because loneliness made them sick. "Weak social connections have health effects similar to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and a greater negative effect than obesity," he said.<sup>1</sup> Over the past five years such trends have abruptly gotten worse. In 2012, 5.9 percent of young people suffered from severe mental health issues. By 2015 it was 8.2 percent.

In the September 2017 issue of *The Atlantic*, Jean Twenge wrote a much-discussed article entitled "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" It charts the accelerating social collapse. "Teenagers are suddenly less likely to date, less likely to leave the home without their parents, more likely to put off the activities of adulthood. They are spending more time alone with their digital screens, and the greater the screen time, the greater the unhappiness. Eighth graders who are heavy users of social media are 27 percent more likely to be depressed."<sup>2</sup>

Any clever wolf (or better yet, a pack of wolves) attacking a flock of sheep knows that the first strategy is to identify the weakest one, the slowest one, and then break it away from the flock, isolating it so it's defenseless. *National Geographic* shows this all the time as those higher in the food chain attack those lower in the food chain. The sad truth is we are isolating ourselves. We withdraw from community, resist joining or belonging to anything that might require something from us, like an investment of time or money or talent. And in isolating ourselves, we become more vulnerable and susceptible to disease and even self-harming activity. This seems to be part of the "affluenza" that infects us today – isolated in our homes keeping up appearances rather than engaged meaningfully

---

1 <https://hbr.org/cover-story/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>

in one another's lives. Even our families seem to be disintegrating with devastating consequences.

Our confirmation students who joined the church last week included one young man who described his experience of being bullied at school. He found a very different environment at church. In school he was targeted and isolated, whereas here he was included and welcomed, receiving friendship and kindness. It was a transformational experience to be gathered in. That's why churches are so important. They gather us in and provide the kind of social network that leads to better personal health and healthier communities.

Outside our sanctuary is a cornerstone for this church which says "founded in 1941." In New England, however, ancient parishes of the seventeenth century are not described as "founded," among the Congregationalists. The sign will not say "Founded in 1620 or founded in 1690." Instead they used a very strange nomenclature used nowhere else in the church, either in Europe or in this country. It says, "Gathered in 1620, gathered in 1640 or gathered in 1690."<sup>3</sup> And there is something very different between being founded and being gathered in. The notion is that sheep are being gathered into the sheepfold. It is a powerful image for a society that hungers for connection because it also values independence and individualism. In moments of isolation, loneliness, alienation and hopelessness, the Good Shepherd responds to our deepest longings for community by gathering us in and offering an alternative to our fears, and separation, and insecurities.

So please stop exiling yourself from the flock because you think you don't pray enough, or don't know much about the Bible or theology. Don't worry about being enthusiastic enough, or not being sure of what you believe. Jesus says, "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep." Listen to that. Listen to what he is saying. He does not say that we're in or out of the flock depending upon our ability to believe. But the exact opposite! Jesus says our ability to believe depends upon whether or not we are in the flock. And there is reason to believe we are in the flock, my friends, if only because we are here with this flock this morning. And if that's true, then the chances are that

---

<sup>3</sup> I'm grateful to Peter J. Gomes for this illustration found in his sermon "Good Shepherd, Good Sheep" in *Currents in Theology and Missions* 30:4 (August 2003)

the way real believers believe is the way most of us believe: strongly on some days and pitifully on others, with enough faith to move mountains on some occasions, and not enough to get out of bed on others.

We belong to the flock not because of our own certainty but because of God's certainty of us. No one is able to snatch us out of God's hand. If you have a hard time hearing the voice of the shepherd, be patient with yourself, because some days it sounds like a whistle and some days like a cluck; some days it sounds like a love song and some days like a curse. It's not a voice that always speaks in words, much less full sentences, but you can usually hear it sometime between your getting up and your laying down each day. ". . . making you lay down in green pastures, leading you beside still waters, restoring your soul."

And be patient with the rest of us too. No one can follow a shepherd all by themselves, after all. We're stuck with this flock, or some flock, and everyone knows that sheep are, well, sheep. They panic easily and refuse to be pushed. They make most of their decisions based upon appetites and emotions. And they tend to get into head butting contests for no reason at all. But stick with the flock. It's where the shepherd can be found, which makes it your best bet not only for survival but also for joy and health.