

Children's Moment *A Good Story*

Good morning, boys and girls. We learn things from a lot of people in other cultures. Today, I have a Jewish story to share with you.

“A couple lived with their children in a house. They were always getting in each other's way and there was so little space they could hardly breathe!

Finally, one partner could stand it no more. They talked to their spouse and asked them what to do. ‘Go see the rabbi,’ they said, and after arguing a while, the partner went.

The rabbi greeted the person and said, "I see something is troubling you. Whatever it is, you can tell me."

They told the rabbi how miserable things were at home with them and the children, all eating, living and sleeping in one house with no space. They told the rabbi, ‘We're even starting to yell and fight with each other. Life couldn't be worse.’

The rabbi thought very deeply about their problem. Then he said, ‘Do exactly as I tell you and things will get better. Do you promise?’ ‘I promise,’ they said.

The rabbi then asked a strange question. ‘Do you own any animals?’

‘Yes,’ they said. ‘We have one cow, one goat, and some chickens.’

‘Good,’ the rabbi said. ‘When you get home, take all the animals into your house to live with you.’

They were astonished to hear this advice from the rabbi, but they had promised to do exactly what the rabbi said. They went home and took all the animals into the house.

The next day they ran back to see the rabbi. ‘What have you done to us, Rabbi?’ they cried. ‘It's awful. We did what you told us and the animals are all over the house! Rabbi, help us!’

The rabbi listened and said calmly, ‘Now go home and take the chickens back outside.’

They did as the rabbi said, but hurried back again the next day.

‘The chickens are gone, but Rabbi, the goat!’ they moaned. ‘The goat is smashing up all the furniture and eating everything in sight!’

The good rabbi said, ‘Go home and remove the goat and may God bless you.’

So they went home and took the goat outside. But they ran back again to see the rabbi, crying and wailing. ‘What a nightmare you have brought to our house, Rabbi! With the cow it's like living in a stable! Can human beings live with an animal like this?’

The rabbi said sweetly, ‘My friends, you are right. May God bless you. Go home now and take the cow out of your house.’ And they went quickly home and took the cow out of the house.

The next day they came running back to the rabbi again. ‘O Rabbi,’ they said with a big smile on their face, ‘we have such a good life now. The animals are all out of the house. The house is so quiet and we've got room to spare! What a joy!’¹

Even though you may feel like you're stuck at home with your parents, things could be worse. Jesus, our Rabbi – our teacher, teaches us how to be happy and comfortable with what we have.

Will you do something for me this week? God gave us all great Moms, so let's say thank you and show them how much they mean to us. You can color or draw and sign a card for your Mom or whatever you think she might like. You might draw a picture of your house and everyone who lives there. That way we can show her how we love her.

Let us pray ...

¹ <https://www.beliefnet.com/love-family/parenting/2000/10/teaching-tales-the-way-you-like-it.aspx>

Message: “Do You Know God’s Name?”**What do you get when you cross a sheep and a porcupine?**

A sheep that can knit it’s own sweaters. I was looking for a different joke, one along the lines of “a sheep, a goat and a rabbi went into a bar ...,” but decided this one was safer.

Today we read a famous parable from John 10. It’s about sheep, shepherds, flocks, thieves and gates. We’re not really familiar with the images in today’s modern world, so the story can miss the mark. Let’s go through the story, to make sure we know what Jesus is saying.

This passage shows us Jesus in one of his most familiar roles, the Good Shepherd. He’s following a long tradition. Abraham and Moses were shepherds. So was David. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus pardons us, heals us, protects us and offers himself for us. Jesus teaches, *“No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends”* (John 15:13). He’s a role model.

People sacrifice for us. Veterans tell stories of comrades who saved them at the loss of their own lives. Parents sacrifice for children. Spouses sacrifice. When we freely and willingly put ourselves in harm’s way for another, we’re following the way of love Jesus shows us.

One thing that’s important anytime you read a passage from the Bible is to read it in context. When you’re studying scripture, I always encourage you to read what happens before the passage, as well as what happens afterward. This kind of careful review makes sure we don’t interpret things the way we want, but the way were intended.

For example, the story of Penuel, a man who was born blind, is told in the 9th chapter of John. People asked Jesus what sins his parents did for him to be born blind. Jesus said, *“You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do”* (John 10:3-4, MSG).

To prove what God can do, Jesus did a miracle. He made the person born blind able to see. Amazing! The whole town was buzzing with the news. People were asking, “Isn’t this the beggar who was blind?” Some denied it, even when Penuel said, “It’s me. That man gave me sight.” It was causing an uproar.

What did they do? They marched Penuel to the town council, the religious and business leaders of the community. They asked the man questions but didn't believe him. Even his parents didn't know what to say. Penuel kept telling them about the man who healed him. They couldn't get him to change his story, so they finally kicked him out.

Jesus found the man and asked, "*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*"

Penuel said, "Point him out to me, sir, so I may believe in him."

Jesus said, "*You're looking right at him. Don't you recognize my voice?*"

"Master, I believe," Penuel said. And he worshipped Jesus. (vv35-38)

Then Jesus said, "*I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretense of seeing will be exposed as blind.*"

Some the business leaders overheard him and said, "Does that mean you're calling us blind?"

Jesus said, "*If you were really blind, you'd be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you're accountable for every fault and failure.*"

Right after that, Jesus tells the parable of the sheep in the pen, their shepherd and the thief, followed by a lesson about the gate. Jesus is using a story to teach people about what just happened.

Jesus is telling everyone who he is and why they should believe in him and follow. In this set of passages Jesus says three things,

- "I am the light of the world" (9:5)
- "I am the gate" (10:9)
- "I am the Good Shepherd" (10:11)

Let's take these in reverse order. Jesus said, "*I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and they know me*" (v14).

Who are the sheep Jesus is talking about? They're us – you and me, your family and friends, and everyone. We're all like sheep. When we gather together, we're like a flock of sheep.

Why is God's flock compared to sheep and not cattle, chickens, or camels? Sheep need a leader, a shepherd. Without one, they wander off and get lost, injured or die. Sheep are important in everyday life.

We're comfortable with the analogy of sheep and shepherd. That's a western motif we like. However, it wasn't attractive in Jesus' time. It was well understood, but not appealing. Sheep were necessary. They were part of life for wool, food and sacrifice. They're a commodity. People didn't keep sheep as pets. If you've been on a farm or ranch, you know the lesson: don't name the livestock!

We've gentrified the image of a shepherd and sheep in our culture. We like to build them up, make them more acceptable. The reality is sheep are dumb, stubborn, smelly and skittish animals. They require a lot of care. Sheep are so dumb they'll run off a cliff if you lead them to it. They won't drink from a stream of running water. It has to be calm.

Being called a sheep in Jesus' day is equivalent to being called a homeless person today. I mean no offense to our homeless. Isaiah said we "*all, like [the homeless], have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way*" (Isaiah 53:6). This was just as true in his time, 700 years before the birth of Yeshua, as it is now, 2,000 years later.

It's not an appealing image. It implies you can't care for yourself. You have a lot of faults. You need someone to watch over you.

The good thing about sheep is they'll follow a good leader, a shepherd who cares for them, someone they recognize. Jesus' parable and the explanation he gives make it clear: he wants the people to make up their own minds. Jesus is telling them to listen and respond to God's voice, not the voices of bad leaders, who would mislead them.

Bad leaders are interested in their own needs. They don't really pay attention to the needs of people. They don't feed us when they should. They don't make sure we're cared for when we're sick. They don't provide a safe place for us. They don't protect us from bad people and those who want to take us away from what's good. They're like thieves. Their focus is on their own benefit, at the expense of others.

Good leaders are like good shepherds. They're always watching out for other people. They make sure we have good food. They make sure

we're taken care of when we're sick. They provide safe and secure places for us. They protect us from bad people. They teach us the things we need to know to be healthy.

Jesus is the best shepherd of all. He leads us to heaven. Jesus is watching over us, caring for us and protecting us – right now! Jesus sends good leaders to us to help. People who really, truly believe in Jesus are those whom God has sent to help and teach us.

But the story goes deeper. Life is more than just compassion and sacrifice. Jesus talks about a gate.

Here's an image of a sheep pen. One thing you'll notice about them: there's no gate. The shepherd served another role. The shepherd stood in the gateway, letting the sheep in. Then the shepherd sat or slept in the gateway, keeping wolves and thieves out.



Jesus said, “I am the gate” (10:9). He is our leader and protector.

What is Jesus the gate to? The kingdom of God. And not just after we die, but here and now. Jesus said, “*The kingdom of God is near*” (Matthew 10:7). In God's kingdom we find life in it's fullest. Not a half-life, lived in fear, but a life lived wholly, completely and with confidence because of who we are and what Jesus has done for us. We're Jesus' family, sisters and brothers of the Savior.

Jesus opens the door to a new way of living, a better life, where our soul is tended and safe, in good keeping. We're all welcome to come in and rest. The only thing we need to do is hear his voice, believe and follow only him. But there's another character in the story, the thief.

Who is the thief? False teachers, false Messiahs, bad leaders are thieves. Anyone who oppresses or marginalizes others for their own gain is a thief. This strikes closer to home than you will want to hear. We can take actions with good intention that cause great harm.

A good example is our immigration practices, particularly the separation of children from their parents. I know this will turn some of you off; however, don't we need to revisit our thinking in light of this

lesson from Jesus? You may disagree. You'd find agreement with those in Jesus' day who thought he was stark, raving mad (v20).

Like it or not, there are two sides to following Jesus. Both are part of the way of life he shows us. First, we all need to receive care, protection and guidance. We follow Jesus and those who Jesus sends to lead us willingly and freely. We accept and return God's love. This is God's blessing. We are pardoned and healed by God's grace.

The other side of the coin is just as important. We are those who give care, protection and guidance to others. We, too, serve as shepherds or servant leaders in our homes, groups and community. There are expectations that come with being part of Jesus' family. We're to serve others, giving care, helping others break the chains of injustice, oppression and prejudice, wherever we find them.

Will you be a good shepherd of those God has entrusted to your care? God gives us family, friends and neighbors. Children are part of our lives, whether they are ours or others'. Jesus' lesson on the Good Samaritan teaches us our neighbors aren't just the people next door who we like, but the people in our community who aren't like us, who we don't agree with.

We're called to care for everyone, making peace with each other. That's what Jesus teaches. It's at the heart of our Wesleyan way of living, seeking social justice. It's only when the community is restored that true healing begins. When we put up fences – physically or mentally, we're no better than the business leaders of Jesus' day, who ignored what was plainly obvious to everyone else.

Let me close with one, last story. George Smith travelled in the Holy Land at the end of the 19th century before its modern development and westernization. He relates an incident that illustrates our passage:

“Sometimes we enjoyed our noonday rest beside one of those Judean wells, to which three or four shepherds come down with their flocks. The flocks mixed with each other and we wondered how each shepherd would get his own again. But after the watering and the playing were over, the shepherds one by one went up different sides of the valley, and each called out his peculiar call; and the sheep of each drew out of the

crowd to their own shepherd, and the flocks passed away as orderly as they came.”

The sheep knows its shepherd’s voice. I believe one of the neglected, seldom-taught skills of a disciple is to learn to discern Jesus’ voice. We hear many voices - the pressures of our society’s expectations, our family’s desires, and our own selfish desires. It’s possible to hear Jesus’ voice and distinguish it from the others, but we must make a practice of learning which is which. I don’t know any way to learn this without making some mistakes in the process, so it’s good to learn this with the help of a more mature Christian brother or sister.

Once we learn to hear Jesus’ voice - the leading of the Spirit - then God can guide us, teach us, and use us much more effectively than before.²

Let us go and serve the Lord. Amen

Let us pray ...

² http://www.jesuswalk.com/john/19_shepherd.htm

Psalm 23 (CEB)

The Lord is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

He lets me rest in grassy meadows;

he leads me to restful waters;

he keeps me alive.

He guides me in proper paths

for the sake of his good name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no danger because you are with me.

Your rod and your staff -

they protect me.

You set a table for me

right in front of my enemies.

You bathe my head in oil;

my cup is so full it spills over!

Yes, goodness and faithful love

will pursue me all the days of my life,

and I will live in the Lord's house

as long as I live.

John 10:1-10 (CEB)

“I assure you that whoever doesn’t enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won’t follow a stranger but will run away because they don’t know the stranger’s voice.” Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn’t understand what he was saying.

So Jesus spoke again, “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. I came so that they could have life - indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.”