

**United Church of Fayetteville**  
**310 E. Genesee Street**  
**Fayetteville, NY 13066**

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**MULTIPLE CHOICE** (Psalm 23, John 10:11-18)

Scripture and other language of the church are full of the pastoral imagery of sheep, flocks and shepherds. That language serves as a metaphor to describe and guide behavior and relationships in the community of faith. It is imagery that has been and is an enormous source of comfort. On the surface, it appears straightforward. Yet, its poetry can also be complicated to parse. There are lots of ways to improve our grasp of Scripture, to engage in bible study and to prepare for preaching. One tried and true method is to place one's self in various roles in the text to gain understanding from different perspectives. It was a method I employed this week and I invite you to explore with me today.

As it turns out, there are lots of places to stand in today's reading. Let's consider this multiple choice question based on hearing the gospel for today.

Christians are:

- A. Shepherds
- B. Hired hands
- C. Sheep
- D. All of the above
- E. None of the above

We might easily choose "A: shepherds." Pastors are most frequently referred to as shepherds, but in the Protestant traditions we speak of the priesthood of all believers. We are all called and have responsibility for leading people to nourishment and safety and to new pastures when the food in this one is gone. We all have responsibility for caring for the lost or injured, even at risk to ourselves. We're shepherds, although sometimes we wonder if we are very good ones. We would lead the people to nourishment and safety and protect them from danger, if only we knew which was which. Still, "A" fits.

We might, with discomfort, answer "B: hired hands." Hired, not in the sense that we work for wages, but because we act on behalf of Christ, taking care of his flock. We care for them as though they were ours, but we know they are not. The discomfort with answer "B: hired hands", comes not because we are spending our time and energy on something that doesn't belong to us, but because we are painfully aware that like the hired hands in the text, there are dangers from which we will not or cannot protect the sheep. Whether it's because we don't care (a rare few), or are scared or tired, just don't see the danger, have not the ability, or are the victims of circumstance, there will be members of the flock, indeed entire flocks that will be injured or lost, because of our limitations. We'd have to answer "B: hired hands."

We could also choose answer "C: sheep". We are members of the flock. We can only push a metaphor so far. This is where this one collapses. We are the same species as those we seek to serve. We too can be lost or injured and killed. We may try to hide it or we may find others unwilling to accept it, but we do not have significantly different abilities or needs than the people we seek to serve. So, yes, we're "C: sheep."

Which brings us to "D: All of the above." We are shepherds, hired hands and sheep. No one of them is easy to be, in the best of times. Yet we are called to be all three in times of great complexity for the church and the world. It can be overwhelming and we confess to feeling overwhelmed. ("Overwhelmed" was a word heard with some frequency at last week's Board retreat.)

So, we're shepherds, hired hands and sheep. Having grown up in the suburbs and being ignorant about most things ovine, while preparing for this sermon, I made a phone call to a man who raises sheep. He said, "You understand that I am not a "shepherd" in the Biblical sense. There are still places in the world where shepherds work. They live with the sheep twenty-four hours a day for months on end, guiding them from pasture to pasture. I am a "sheep farmer."

"What distinction are you making?"

"Sheep farmers build fences."

Hearing that made me wonder if, in our doubt and our confusion, if in our sense of inadequacy for the task of being Christians in the world today, instead of choosing "D: all of the above" (shepherd, hired hands and sheep), we've chosen "E: none of the above". Instead of sheep or hired hands or shepherds, have we become sheep farmers?

We are not the first to be called to be the church in difficult times. We have the benefit of the experience of all the people of faith who have gone before us. That experience comes down to us in Scripture and in the tenets, practices, and history of the church universal. These things tell us what the Lord has marked out of bounds; or where the church has seen the members of the flock injured or killed; or has seen the church injuring others; they tell us where people have gotten lost. This inheritance of tradition and history serves the positive function of fences which mark the pastures known to be safe; protect those who cannot protect themselves; separate known safe pastures from the places where those who have gone have not returned alive; or delineating places the church has never gone. It doesn't mean that fences can't be used in less than kind or healthy ways. It doesn't mean we shouldn't go to such places. It does mean we need to be prepared to assume risk and perhaps get lost ourselves. Fences are movable and have been moved. Some will be moved and some ought to be taken down. The church in the world and the people in this room will never agree entirely on which ones are which. That is not this sermon. This sermon is about how we can understand our own relationship with fences we or the culture have built and how we can respond to them most faithfully today for the sake of Christ in the world.

Christians of an ecumenical and largely liberal bent have a curious relationship with the sheep fences of our practice. We don't fence our table – all are welcome at this meal. We are active in ecumenical efforts and people with a broad range of opinions can consider themselves and be considered active and faithful members of this and many congregations. We trust in the protection of the Lord, who is our shepherd. We expose ourselves to risk in his name, so that those who are his sheep, but not of the flock might answer when they hear his voice. Our fence is permeable from the outside.

The fence is, I believe, less permeable from the inside. Today, for the contemporary inclusive faith community (which includes us), the fence is simply one of identity, not exclusion. It delineates who we are as a congregation, as the Christian church in the world. It provides anchors of tradition and a sense of the history we have with our God and the people of God. Yet, around the world and here at home, we appear to be more frightened, confused and surprised by our own needs, misunderstandings, and brokenness than we are those of others. We deal less effectively with people already among us, with whom we disagree, than those in other

communities or of no community at all. In our confusion and anxiety, we sometimes focus more on taking care of those who are already here than we do inviting the gifted, the lonely, or the lost to join us. No community of faith is right for all people at all times, yet we often seem embarrassed by who we are. We spent last Sunday celebrating all those things we are and have to offer the world. We have things to do yet and we are human with limits, but we have no reason for embarrassment.

Further, it seems, that in our fear of using a fence to keep others out, we have created a pen for ourselves. We are so concerned about offending someone else; or practicing a type of evangelism that we don't admire; or are uncertain about how to share what we have here that we rarely speak of it; rarely invite someone in, unless it's to a "safe event" that has nothing to do with our faith. There is nothing wrong with building our comfort level with regard to new or rusty practices. There is nothing wrong with being a servant to the community, but why are we silent about what drives those services. Our faith life offers so much more. To go out and invite someone in is not to judge their lives, but offer to them a place in ours.

Fences aren't all bad. They provide a statement of identity, protection and guidance; and partly, they are a matter of efficiency. My sheep farmer resource expanded on that idea this way: "Fences mean you don't need to be a shepherd. Sheep farmers don't lead the sheep anywhere." (May I say, "Ouch!" for all of us?)

Could it be that we have indeed chosen "E: none of the above"? If so, how does that square with our calling, not to be sheep farmers, but to follow the good shepherd? For we agreed to follow Jesus, to go wherever he goes, not to wait for him to come to where we are.

In another place in scripture, Jesus spoke of himself as being the gate to the sheepfold. At UCF and many churches, our gates open inward very well, provided someone from the outside is pushing them. Perhaps we, who are already here, need to change our relationship with the fence of our identity and practice, being more Christ-like, opening more gates from the inside, going out through them, extending more invitations to others, rather than staying in the shelter and security of the pasture we know, waiting for Jesus to come to here toting those without a faith home. along with him.

To do that takes an extraordinary amount of courage and re-thinking of the way we relate to the world. Yet, what I know of this congregation is this – we have the courage, the imagination and the faith to let God do a new thing in us for the sake of Christ, for the sake of the world, and for the sake of our life here together.

We still have time to complete this multiple choice test. We still have time to change our answer. We still face complex questions and being "D: all of the above" is no easy task. Yet, the gospel writer's words stand not so much as critique of what we do as reassurance about whose we are. For the life of the flock depends only on the one who laid down his life for us and was raised up – the one who promises that nothing and no one can tear us from his protection. We can change our answer if we are able to give up some of our anxiety about the world, in exchange for a deeper trust in the one who is the shepherd of each and every one of us. To do so is no less a risky business than it was before -- it is however possible when we remember we go with the one who is both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God. Perhaps then, together, we can lead the people home.

Let us begin by remembering who we are and whose we are: Let us make part of the beginning by praying together our psalm for the day, Psalm 23 as it is printed in the worship folder.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;  
he makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul.  
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for thou art with me.  
Thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me.  
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies  
thou anointest my head with oil,  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.