

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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SHEEP

the unexamined life of community

by Drew Downs

Jesus likes to talk of sheep and shepherds and it continues to be among the favorite linguistic patterns of people of faith. We talk of leaders as shepherds and their flocks. It is all so *easy* for us. And yet, at the same time, we aren't terribly interested in learning about the psychology of livestock, which might complicate our use of the image. Sheep become a shorthand for dumb, mindless followers who are in need of Jesus's generous kindness and love.

We ought to be more careful with the image. And it is strange that we continue to resonate with one we know so little about. Especially when it comes to our relationship to our neighbors. The hyperindividualism of 21st century American can't contend with the truth that sheep flock. That Jesus isn't just here to save us from our personal stuff, or that faith itself isn't an entirely personal endeavor. Our base image for our relationship is that we are gathered to care for one another.

EASTER

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WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Obligated to Respond

Last week, when the president of the United States insulted Pope Leo XIV and attempted to explain Christian theology to him, it became clear that at least one aspect of U.S. politics has totally jumped the shark. That is the binary, one-side-or-the-other framing of events along partisan lines. Because, on the one side, was a president and supporters trying to define calls for peace, justice, generosity, and love as unChristian and on the other was everyone else.

There are reasons why we are careful when discussing national politics — particularly because a foundational part of The Episcopal Church is to be a big enough tent to hold all political parties. And there are reasons why, in the present era, some are self-selecting out of conversation with us. But it is at times like these that we be reluctant to avoid challenging the misrepresentation of our common faith.

It doesn't start or end for us with partisanship, but with truth. The pope is a better judge of theology than our president. And I would say the same about his predecessors, several of whom I vehemently disagreed with.

Consider, too, how normal it was just a century ago for protestants to speak so ill of the pope. Our own Book of Common Prayer has enshrined objectionable anti-catholic language for centuries. Therefore, let us not center our outrage on decorum and precedent, because sadly, there is precedence. Center instead on how wrong the president is about Jesus, about God, and about what it means to be a good neighbor. Or when a cabinet appointee quotes from *Pulp Fiction* rather than the Bible for prayer. These are people drawing the church into politics in ways the church is obligated to respond. So let us be generous and humble in our correction of the record.

With love,
Drew+

EASTER

2026

FOR SUNDAY

Easter 4A

April 26, 2026

Collect

O God, whose Son Jesus is the good shepherd of your people: Grant that when we hear his voice we may know him who calls us each by name, and follow where he leads; who, with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Reading

from John 10:1-10

Jesus said, "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.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, 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."

EASTER

Reflection

Jesus sometimes has trouble with mixing metaphors. I was taught to avoid this in school, for several reasons. One of those is clarity. Sometimes, though, when Jesus seems to be getting going, his mind just flies in these different directions because he's riffing on his image and explaining it means we get to see how many different dimensions of this apply.

Jesus is the gate and he is also the shepherd, just as he seems to be saying that we can be the gate for the shepherd that is him and also he is the gate for the shepherd that is God and it all gets kind of messy if we're being honest. And yet it all does, in a way, end up making sense.

I am drawn to the messiness in this teaching, where Jesus compares himself to the shepherd, the gate, and the gatekeeper in the span of a couple of paragraphs. And what draws me is that, when we stop focusing on getting the nature of Jesus and shepherding precisely right, but follow the movement of the mind through the image, we can see that this is a teaching that equally reflects the nature of Jesus, God, and humanity.

Just like one of the essential lessons in Christian formation is to never read the Bible as allegory — treating a story like Noah's Arc like it's *Animal Farm*, for instance — we should resist viewing the Jesus we read in John as so literal a communicator. His vision shifts, inviting us to follow along, and as we do, we can find a message about God also resonates with Jesus and even ourselves.

Does this make it easier to read? Not really. But there is likely a part of you that followed it intuitively. And I think that is the part Jesus is trying to connect with. And inviting you to connect with, too.

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