

“Following the Shepherd: Forging Our Way”

John 10:1-14

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In last week’s sermon we looked at the text in John, in which Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, and if so, told Peter to “feed my lambs, tend my sheep and feed my sheep.” In that sermon we looked at the first and third of those responsibilities of living in love, feeding the lambs and feeding the sheep; this week we will look at the second responsibility of living in love that being, tending the sheep. Last week as we looked at feeding the lambs and sheep, we explored the fact that people are on different spiritual diets! I named many of those diets but on the way out an older woman; now I did not say old, she said, “You didn’t name my diet...” “Oh, which one is that?” I asked. She responded; “I am on the social diet!”

Older or younger, there are many on the social diet. As I was preparing this sermon, knowing that many of our teens would be here [or at the second service,] I was thinking, what an archaic image for western Christians in the 21st century...a Good Shepherd and sheep. Then I laughed to myself, when I picked the first sermon focus verse [4]: “the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” I changed it because of the growing reality that most teens according to recent studies have another form of preferred communication more than face to face conversations or even phone calls, teens text! Now just to show that we are on different social diets, how many of you have never texted? As you probably know, texting is sending a typed message through a cell phone. Texting is a major, if not the major, part of a teen’s social diet! A study was released just this week showing that the average adult sends just 10 text messages per day, but older teenage girls - aged 14-17 - send about 3,000 per month! A study a year ago, showed nationally, more than 75 billion text messages are sent a month, and the most avid texters are 13 to 17. Teens take cell phones to school...texting in-between classes or sometimes, if they dare, during class. Teens are even known to sleep with their cell phones so that they can text from bed, and yes, parents know that! Of course, it’s not just teens, its adults as well although in smaller numbers. I remember during a 5:00 Christmas Eve Service several years ago, the Packers were playing and before worship was even over, people in worship knew that the Packers had won and what the score was...how, because they had someone text them!

The way of communicating is changing and the way of communicating our faith will necessarily change too. In many ways it looks to be as radical as when the printing press made books easily available to the masses...if you don’t believe me just search the internet and see how many people of faith, pastors, seminary professors, churches, and thousands of the faithful “sheep” communicate through Blogs, Twitter and Facebook! I played around with this idea, what if Jesus were to text his message...I’m not sure what it would be but I am sure that this [hold up sign] “OMG” [for you non or novice texters this is “Oh My God”] would have a whole new meaning!

The text, in this case, the Biblical text, we are looking at today is about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, using an analogy that made a whole lot of sense to the people of the 1st century but for those of us in western society in the 21st century it can be a bit challenging. But the basics that we are going to look at today are ones we can easily understand, they are the second responsibility of living in love that Jesus, the Good Shepherd gave to Peter and all of us... “to tend my sheep,” take care of them, guard and guide the mature in faith, as well as the maturing,

shepherding others toward the Good Shepherd. We have a dual responsibility and a double blessing: we are to follow the Good Shepherd and we are to tend, guide and guard, one another.

This morning, [at the second service] we will celebrate having done this “guarding and guiding” as a community of faith when we celebrate the confirmation of fourteen teens. These teens/The teens being confirmed were baptized (one will be baptized today) and at their baptism the church made promises to guide and guard them in the faith. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen years later, we have tremendous evidence of a job well done! Together our congregation, for some of these kids since birth, and other congregations, have tended these young people, guiding and guarding them as they matured in life and in faith. Those of us teaching confirmation can see evidence of this in all the assignments but one in particular I want to share. We have the teens write a faith statement. Just a side note, this would be an excellent assignment for any one ~ young or older! To give you an idea of the depth of faith being lived out in our teen’s lives; I decided to do something I’ve never done before; I asked their permission to share a line from each of their statements in a combined statement of faith. Now you may not agree with everything they believe but I encourage you to listen to how they are growing in their faith. I did not change any of their words. [if you pick up a copy of this sermon to read, I also did not change any spelling]. So here it is, a combined statement of faith from Covenant’s Confirmation Class 2010:

I believe that God is neither a man nor a woman, but has the qualities of each. God responds to what people say, but not in an obvious way -- we have to be receptive and willing to listen to be helped.

I believe Jesus is our savior [to me] and someone who like God, will listen to whatever you want to say. Jesus was also the son of god and was sent after god to help us. To guide us on our journey through life.

I believe the Holy Spirit is a manifestation of God on Earth, whether it be in people or in our natural surroundings. I believe that the Spirit is also a messenger of God, used to spread His wishes in our world.

I believe the bible is the words of God told to us by his believers. The Bible is God telling us the kind of people s/he wants us to be.

I believe the church is a community filled with people that help you and are there for you when you make decisions in your life. Church is also a very welcoming environment, and every church member accepts every person. Church is important in the development of one’s faith because members help and support you when you need it and help you learn even more about the Christian faith. If not for the church, I wouldn’t have nearly as much faith as I do.

I believe the sacraments also play a role in our faith journey, baptism is the beginning of your faith journey and communion is reminder that Jesus died for us on the cross to save us. The sacraments, baptism and communion, are a way to confirm your faith and show others how devoted you are to the Christian faith. The sacraments should be a reminder of one’s dedication to the Christian faith as they go throughout their faith journey.

I believe that service projects make you closer to God because Jesus said love your

neighbor. I think if you help someone out you are getting closer to God every time you do it!

I am ready to be confirmed because I believe in the Christian faith and I am ready to live my life under Jesus so I can continue on my journey of becoming closer to God!

The church has guided and guarded these teens throughout the years, what possible ways could God be guiding and guarding the church [us] through the words of these teens? Are we open to viewing God as neither male nor female? Individually and as a community, are we receptive and willing to listen to God in order to be helped? Do we know the joy of getting closer to God every time we help others? The church section is also challenging! The teens say, “The church is there for you...” Are we there for one another? They also said, “The Church is also a very welcoming environment, and every church member accepts every person” Do we? Really? They see it! It’s not just an ideal...God guides us to...it is a part of our guarding one another.

Last week we got a clue of our differences by looking at our different spiritual diets, this week we see that tending for us, the guiding and guarding is not dependent on our spiritual diets...it’s for all of us, regardless of our diets! It’s an essential part of what makes us the church! The teens say, “If not for the church, I wouldn’t have nearly as much faith as I do.” What a remarkable affirmation...can we say the same thing? The church is one way God guides and guards us...are we open to that guidance? Do we welcome that guarding, that protection from other things ~ the ways of the world, our own ways, that might lead us away from following the Good Shepherd? Are we open to changes in communicating our faith so that teens and adults using different forms of communication like texting, Facebook or someday maybe [it’s on our wish list] even a permanent screen in our sanctuary [so I won’t have to put things on poster board] no, that’s not the reason, a screen could enrich and enhance our worship so that all can join us even more in celebrating the Good News...our meeting them like Jesus met Peter, where he was! Not surrendering what was...and is, but incorporating more so that more can continue on the journey of becoming closer to God!

It’s a journey we’re all on, young, older, and old, a journey of becoming closer to God. No matter what our diet to nourish us on the way, that’s our destination, becoming closer to God and helping others become closer to God! And on that journey, God is guiding us and guarding us...from children to teens to those in their 80’s & 90’s! Each of us, all of us, individually and together, is forging our way in following the Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd is guiding us...to a future God is opening for us, as the psalmist said, “a green pasture” beside beautiful waters that we may share God’s peace and promises with each other and with the world. Psalm 23 is sharing God’s guiding and guarding from a three thousand year old image, it’s still helpful, but in our focus verse for today Jesus says, “...I know my sheep and they follow me.” Knowing that some of the “sheep” of today communicate differently from the psalmist...what would that same message of guiding and guarding be for today’s thousands of texters? How would Jesus text it: how about this? [hold up signs] 143 & GYB, which means “I love you and I got your back!” Amen!