

**April 30, 2023**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit. Amen**

**Sermon by Rev. Jerry LiaBraaten**

### **LOVE FIERCELY!**

Many years ago I knew a man by the name of Clarence. Clarence Lee. He lived in western Minnesota near Bemidji and Foston. People in the area knew him as a good farmer. He and his wife, Mable, operated a small and profitable “full service” farm complete with livestock and crops. But there was something else people knew about Mr. Lee. They knew that he was highly skilled in animal husbandry. And, they knew one other important thing about him. He loved animals. All animals. So, if you had one that got sick or was injured or was having difficulty in childbirth, you could call on him day or night and he’d drop everything and come.

I knew him, too, only I knew him as Grandpa.

Even though he’d never had formal training in veterinary science, even though he probably didn’t even finish high school, you knew his stuff. Whether you knew him as a neighbor who had an animal that needed help or you knew as your grandfather, you knew he was the real deal. You knew you could trust him. And, you knew he’d do anything and everything in his power to help you no matter what your need or relationship to him. In short, you knew he was legit.

One way of getting at today’s gospel reading (John 10:1-10) is to view it through the lens of legitimacy. Jesus made a clear contrast between the traits of those he called thieves and bandits and a good shepherd. It was a contrast in legitimacy.

Those who are thieves and bandits, don’t enter the sheepfold by the gates...the legitimate entrance. They’ve not taken the time to name or know the sheep. The sheep will not follow them because they are strangers. And ultimately, the sheep can’t trust them because they do not have their best interests at heart. Therefore, these, Jesus is saying, are not legit.

In contrast, good shepherds not only knew their sheep, they named them. They talked to them so the sheep could learn the sound of their voice. The sheep learned to trust them so they would willingly follow. They’d follow because they trusted the good shepherd had their wellbeing at heart. These, Jesus is saying, were indeed legit. Like my grandfather, they were the real deal.

I grew up in a town (Virginia, Minnesota) of about 15,000 people so I considered myself to be a city kid. Going to my grandparent’s farm was a back to nature sort of experience...one I deeply loved. Often, when I got there, the first order of business for me was to make a slingshot, grab some appropriately sized rocks from the driveway and head out into the pasture to do some hunting.

On one particular occasion when I was eight or nine, it was a still, sultry afternoon. Nothing was moving, no squirrels were revealing their hiding place by chattering between themselves, the birds were gone and, frankly, I was bored. I looked around for something, anything to shoot at. That's when I saw Grandpa's sheep.

Now, in my defense, the chances of hitting your intended target with a slingshot when using rocks for ammo are almost zero. You just can't account for the aerodynamics of each one. But, hope springs eternal and I decided to try. I aimed for the south end of a northbound sheep and let 'er fly. To my surprise, I hit a bullseye!...and that sheep did the most amazing thing. It took off like a bolt of lightning right into and through the middle of the flock. Meanwhile the other sheep parted like the Red Sea and by the time said sheep got to the front of the flock they were all racing away from me as fast as their skinny little legs could carry them. They left me in a cloud of dust, ran over the hill and didn't stop until I was well out of their sight.

I laughed so hard I thought I was going to die.

Unfortunately, all this commotion got Grandpa's attention. He'd been working on something up by the barn some 75 yards away but turned and immediately started walking towards me. The length of his stride and the set of his jaw brought me to one simple conclusion: Now, I knew I was going to die.

There was nothing I could do but wait for the inevitable and hope for leniency. Fortunately, he was far more forgiving than I deserved.

I learned something about the essence of my grandfather that day. Something I've never forgotten. It was the reason why his neighbors called on him night or day. It was the reason why even the farm animals seemed to trust him so easily. He didn't just love animals. In fact, he loved them fiercely.

An interesting twist occurs in today's text. In Verse 6 we're told that the disciples didn't understand how this figure of speech, this metaphor, applied to him, their good shepherd. He had to spell it out for them saying, "I am the gate."

It's not the first time we've run into this same problem with them, right? Here again, it would be easy to label them as dunces when it comes to making what we could call the "metaphorical leap" from a simple concrete explanation/level of comprehension and to an abstract or metaphorical one.

But there's another interpretation here. John, the gospel writer of this text, may have actually been employing a literary device to teach us, his readers, something about how to "get" or understand Jesus and apply that understanding to our own lives. Sometimes we have trouble doing the same.

Here's another way of understanding this:

When doing Bible study there are two questions that need to be asked of any text. The first is, "What does this mean?" The second, a far more challenging one, is: "What does this mean *for me*?" This

second one is where we take what we've learned by answering the first question and apply it to our own lives. Not until we do this, can the meaning (s) of the text reach home. No wonder the disciples struggled at this point. We have difficulty making the metaphorical leap, too! If and when we actually do make it, in this particular text we land ourselves smack dab in the middle of one of the greatest controversies of the Bible--one that makes the disciples' dilemma look like child's play.

Simply put, Jesus doesn't claim to be just *a* good shepherd. He claims to be *the* good shepherd. This is something he does with all of the "I am" statements gospel writer John was known for...I am *the* light of the world, I am *the* door, I am *the* resurrection and *the* life, I am *the* way, *the* truth, *the* life." Throughout the ages and even today, some use this "the" instead of "a" to suggest that Jesus Christ (and therefore, Christianity) is the one and only...the exclusive way...to God. This is terribly ironic because Jesus himself was never a "Christian." He was a Jew. He lived his whole life as a Jew. He died as Jew. If anyone could lay claim to the exclusivity of Jesus it would be the Jews. That's a bit of a double irony, isn't it?!

I think there's a different explanation for Jesus' choice of words. It's this: Jesus so identified with his mission that he *became* the mission. In this case, Jesus believed *he was the metaphor...the gate, the door, the light, the way, the truth, and the life* of God. And further, his whole mission on earth was to convince us that we, as his followers, are to see ourselves in the same way...and live accordingly.

Many people are aware that Carl Jung, the ground-breaking Swiss psychiatrist, rejected Christianity and, for that matter, all religion as such. But most people do not know that he believed Jesus Christ was the archetype of a new consciousness. Now that's profound! Yet I believe it was this new level of consciousness in Jesus that was his means for understanding God, himself and his mission.

One final word about Grandpa. His particular expertise was to provide loving care to farm animals that were the most vulnerable, in the most danger, in the deepest crisis. He loved all animals, but it was these whom he didn't just love, he loved fiercely. If we follow Jesus throughout his life and ministry, if we listen to his teachings, if we walk where he walked, if we watch him perform healings and miracles, we see the exact same thing is true for him. He loved all people and all creation, but he reserved his fiercest love for the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, the most vulnerable, those most in danger.

This is a message for the Church collectively and for each of us individually. We who are called *by* love, are called to love all. And, as far as the poor, the outcast, the most vulnerable are concerned...

...we are called to love fiercely.

Amen.