

“Feeling Lost”
John 10:1-10
May 3, 2020

The pandemic snuck up on us and then all at once, it gobsmacked us right between the eyes. Stalwart and frankly in need of sheltering in place, we locked our doors, quickly discovered how to use online resources for connection and learned the value of toilet paper and hand sanitizer. We have been striving to “get through this and return to our normal life.” Let’s face it—we are like lost sheep waiting to be found and restored to quiet and calm herd life. Hear what Jesus says to us in John’s Gospel, the 10th Chapter, beginning at the 1st verse.

“Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he’s up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him, and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them, and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won’t follow a stranger’s voice but will scatter because they aren’t used to the sound of it.”

Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. “I’ll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Our Australian Labradoodle, Jake, taught Chris and me many lessons in his seven short years with us. He was a special child of God to be sure. One of the most profound was the art of surrender, of Giving Way.

Jake always lived in our family with bigger dogs. Shunka was a Bernese Mountain Dog and then there is Kona, a Labrador-we-think-Great-Dane mix. Each of them weighed well over 100 pounds compared to Jakey’s 30-some. The big dogs squeezed him out of pets, treats and toys, striving to always be first. No

matter. Jake would surrender and give way when bullied by the big boys, biding his time until he had unfettered access to us. He always got what he needed; he just didn't need to need it right away.

In the past weeks since the middle of March, we all have been striving to survive the pandemic. We strive to be first at the grocery store in the morning while shelves are still relatively stocked. We strive to find things to do around our homes, projects that have been put off, jigsaw puzzles that have sat patiently waiting to torment us, cards we have been meaning to write and books that have wanted to be held and words to be appreciated.

On the business front, some of you are working hideously long days. Reports are written, bottom lines checked and rechecked and employers are trying to find ways to keep their employees employed, many against all odds and realities. Families are tightening belts, sitting their kids not in classrooms but in dining rooms for school, refinancing mortgages and anxiously awaiting government stimulus and/or unemployment checks. We are NOT opening our retirement account statements-we know better the depression that will cause us to suffer.

We strive to make it all work. We strive to keep smiling. We strive into week after week of being cooped up at home and kept away from grandchildren, friends, family and our comforting church sanctuary. That part really stinks, even if you are an introvert and love staying at home all the time. If you are an extrovert, this time of forced separation is agony.

I read an article this week with a profound message for our churches during this time of disorientation. In, "Finding Our New Normal," Rev. Susan Beaumont wrote,

We are in a liminal season, stuck between an ending and a new beginning. The pathway forward is not knowable. The way we "did

church” even two months ago is done. We have literally been thrown out of our buildings by a pandemic. We can reassure people (and ourselves) by pretending the disruption is temporary. “We will resume all normal activity soon.” That reassurance is not helpful or truthful.

Let’s face it--we have been *striving* to weather this storm. We have boarded up our shop and restaurant windows with removable nails, canceled haircut appointments and bridge games, and postponed vacations. We hoped that our industrious efforts at online worship and virtual pastoral care could protect people from the difficult, creationist work ahead. We have done good work, but it is clear that we have reached the “limits of our own resourcefulness and knowing.” The world has been in one big ball of denial, a protest staged in empty town squares against the unfair disruption of our normal lives. “Normal” doesn’t have a reliable definition anymore.

Think of the predicament close followers of Jesus were put in when their leader went missing, when he ghosted the flock to go meet his destiny. They were lost sheep--disoriented, undirected, hungry, cold, and displaced. They holed up in Jerusalem in secret places, bleating and crying for their Shepherd, for his comforting voice and sure hand. But he did not answer; he could not answer.

The Gospel writers imagined what it would be like if a risen Jesus could and would rejoin the disciples and other faithful ones for just one hour, for just one more day. Sounds like those times when we experienced the death of our own beloved ones. We grieved and yearned for just one more hour with them, just one more day.

In his final week with his disciples, the Good Shepherd knows his end is near. For all his striving to get them ready to live without his leadership, the Son of Man has just one more spiritual practice to master: the art of surrender. Jesus has to surrender the Shepherd's staff to others; his "normal" ceases to have meaning for himself or his flock when Pilate's guards come to take him away. At Gethsemane the night before his arrest, he strives to understand his unfair fate. He begs for redemption. He prays to have the cup taken from him, to be returned to his sheep and his normal routine.

He strives to find a way out; he strains to make denial the thing that redeems him. In his fervent prayers, he asks for help in understanding why: why him, why now, why not, why not another? What Spirit sends him is another kind of answer, not the answer he thinks he needs: Spirit sends him the wisdom and the courage to *surrender*.

Susan Beaumont continues in her article:

To surrender is to yield. We accept this moment as "just the place we need to be" to learn what is most important now. To surrender does not mean giving up or giving in. It does not mean we languish or grow lazy-quite the opposite. It means we lean into the disorientation and trust the leading of the Holy Spirit.

In John 10 terms, it means staying put when we feel lost, trusting that the Shepherd will indeed come to the gate calling our name. It means yielding control in this pandemic time, yielding a false sense of control, that is, for we really have none. It means sitting in the disorientation and the stillness rather than going about to do 5000 new things that we wouldn't do otherwise. It means

yearning, yearning to hear the Shepherd call our name, to hear our name and know that all will be well in its own time.

Author and poet Sonya Renee Taylor speaks the truth of these times when she says:

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was. Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack. We should not long to return, my friends. We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment, one that fits all of humanity and nature.

Jesus said the same thing to his flock of frightened followers, faithful and devoted people who longed to return to their normal, too. Like us, they were thrown into deep disorientation. Their status quo was no more sustainable than was ours. The earth has been groaning under the weight of humanity's selfishness for some time now. Spirit has been found in distant forest cutouts crying her eyes out for the folly of humanity in rejecting God's abundance and grace, instead demanding more of everything, *always* striving for more of everything.

The Shepherd calls us, his sheep, to come to a new gate. The new gate does not open an entrance to the used-up pastureland of old practices and structures; we are beckoned forth to take advantage of the opportunity presented now to let old ways die, to experiment, to yearn for deeper understanding and connection. This is yearning, the "language of the human soul," the collective longing to be led to the gate, to be found on the other end of these lost days.

We are called to a new way of being God's children and we must surrender. We are invited to give up all the striving to make things return to the

good old days, and instead to give way to what God has in store for us in days ahead. Like wonder dog Jake, if we are smart, we will wait for the goodness to find our way to us. We will wait to be called to the Shepherd's side and there be given the love and attention we yearn for.

The new normal is already at the gate, beckoning to us. The new normal is waiting for us AND it is also just beyond our reach. This is an exciting time to be UCC Parker Hilltop, to be Christ's church. IF we are willing to surrender our need to control our future for the time it takes us to discover it, IF we can admit to being lost without striving to fix our disorientation, then we will be able to hear our name being called by the Shepherd, then we will be found.

I will leave you with one of my favorite mantras, one I have offered you in past times. You may find this helpful in your restless times as it has served me well in mine:

"O Lord, I am your lost sheep. I am lost, but I will not let fear take me. I will stay right here until you find me."

Surrender.

Yearn.

Long for more God in your life.

Hear the Shepherd call your name and go to him, eager and renewed by your time apart.

May It Be So.