

"Being the Church Beyond the Sheepfold" Based on John 10:1-10, Acts 2:32-37
Delivered on Sunday, May 3, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Today's scripture readings are important reminders for us in these uncertain times. In the first, we see Jesus claim His role as the Good Shepherd, giving us a picture of what it means to be called by Jesus to faith in Him. In the second, we see what the church is called to be, by getting a glimpse of how the early church responded, when the first believers after the resurrection, heard about Jesus from the apostles.

So much has changed in the past eight weeks, since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. We have been in isolation, practicing social distance, watching church from home. Grandparents have not seen grandchildren. kids have not had play dates. Parents have been forced to assume new roles and responsibilities.

Those who are still working are either in harm's way or have had to learn a completely new set of skills, on the fly without any real training. For those who live alone, this has perhaps been most traumatic, separated from loved ones, from activities, from human interaction. I can't imagine how much more difficult this would be if I lived alone.

But despite all that we are going through, there is hope. We are thankful the rates of infection and the rates of hospitalization seem to be going down, and already parks have been opened with guidelines for social distancing, and perhaps more will open up soon. But even as we have this hope in our current world, the world we live in, that world has changed.

As I said a few weeks ago, the key in this will be to have learned from all of this. Until a vaccine, or a cure, or a reliable life-saving treatment is developed, the new normal will still include more hand washing, mask wearing, distance from each other, and other safety precautions, all to protect each other and prevent the spread of the virus.

As we approach this new world, we have to hold on to what matters most. In today's reading from John, Jesus is speaking to the blind man He had healed. In doing so in front of the leaders who had pushed this man aside, first for his blindness, which they saw as punishment for sin, and then for his commitment to Jesus, whom again they saw as a threat to their own authority in their community.

By calling Himself the Good Shepherd, Jesus is claiming His legitimate authority, tying in with the image of God as shepherd, which we know from Psalm 23. He is also tying the leaders to the image of the selfish shepherds, whom the prophet Ezekiel (Chapter 34) said would be replaced by God as our Shepherd. Jesus is being inclusive of the man who others have excluded and inclusive of a man whom others seem to have thought was cursed. Inclusive of a man whose community saw him as sick, even sick with sin.

As we move into some level of normal, we must take precautions to keep safe, and this will mean wearing masks and may mean having temperatures checked, be it at stores or even here at church, should we be able to open our doors. But it will be important to be in solidarity with one another in this, wearing masks even if we think we are healthy, and getting our temperature taken even if

it feels like a burden, because COVID is not a punishment for the few because of their sins, but an opportunity to be Christ like with each other.

You see, the good news of Jesus Christ is that the God who made all things, entered into our human existence – even in the midst of pain and suffering – to share in our humanity, our limits, and live, die on the cross and rise again on the third day, for us and our salvation, to give us a share of God's life – that life which is abundant and eternal. Through Christ we receive the Holy Spirit, by which we are filled with God's love, to join in God's work, empowered by God's Spirit to restore and reconcile all things to Christ. This is our true humanity – to reflect the image of God in this world now, and in the new creation to come.

That concept of abundant life comes to us from this passage, and it is not as some say, an abundance of possessions, but a completeness in Christ. You see, the abundant or, literally in the Greek, 'all-around' life, is about God in Jesus Christ encircling everything in our lives to be more than enough, so that we can reveal God's kingdom here and now.

Because the sheepfold is not limited to those in the pen, notice that with Jesus as the door and the shepherd, He is the way in and the way out – the way in to be a part of the Kingdom of God and the way out to follow Him wherever he leads. This is not to leave but to follow Him where others are to be where bring others in to know God's love and God's protection. He is God and man, so also, He is the gate and the shepherd.

This leads us to the passage from Acts, which shows us what the church is. We know who Jesus is as God and man, as Shepherd and Gate, from the first passage and the second, tells us what the church is. The first 3,000 believers added to the church after Jesus's resurrection came on Pentecost, during the Festival of the Tents, a time of pilgrimage to Jerusalem from many nations. They were led to their faith in Christ by the Apostle's preaching and each heard it in their own languages.

Their response was to devote themselves to this teaching, namely the teaching of that Good News of Jesus, who He is and what He taught about loving one another. We see that part of what it was to be the church was to share a common life. That feels like it will be most different now because we will have to adapt when we come back.

We have an image of what it means to be in fellowship, and so much of that involves hugs, handshakes, potluck dinners, being in close quarters, sitting at table together, gathered around in groups in the hallways. We see fellowship as getting to know each other on a very personal level, like a family.

But I think our tendency, like with the word abundant, is to think of fellowship and the common life solely as material things, as the things we have always done in the past. In this new normal, we will have to again re-define what it means to live a common life, what it means to be in fellowship with one another, bearing each other's burdens. We will have to be creative and know that whatever we do in this spot, must be true to the teaching of the apostles and Jesus. We must love one another as Jesus loves us.

I don't know if we need to shake hands to know that we respect each other and wish peace. I don't know that we need to see our full faces to be seen by one another fully. Oh, how I long to shake hands and give hugs, to embrace each other, and how I miss seeing each of your faces each week, but these things are secondary to defining what it means to be the church.

After all, that early church responded to the teachings of the apostles and responded by living in fellowship in the brutal Roman Empire by banding together and gave up all that they had and sharing everything according to need. This is not how we do things today. Now, I think we could do more of this in our modern response, but this is what they had to do in their context to share a common life and be in fellowship in the world in which they lived. The truth is that how we do fellowship, share a common life, changes in every age and in every circumstance.

The important thing is that we share a common life in whatever form it is, with each other. It is the life we want to share and some of the things we love and view as fellowship may shorten that life we want to share. That is hard to deal with. It will be hard to accept. Just because how we do things will change, it doesn't mean that we are not the church and not in fellowship, in community, in a common life with one another.

We have kept much of this community and common life in our online presence, and have even grown in this new community with new viewers, where anyone can find us, and where your friends can see that you are watching and see a little bit of your faith. It is a new world and the church will adapt to it.

We find in the text marks of what it is to be the church. The first is the teaching of the apostles, the second is that common life or fellowship and the third is the breaking of the bread. Yes, this is a common meal, sharing food with one another, but it is also the sacrament of Communion which we will share today – a visible sign of God's grace and presence in Jesus Christ.

When we break bread together, even though we are in different rooms today joined by an internet video, we are joined together in this action. That's why this is called communion because it brings us in communion with the real presence of our Lord Jesus Christ and with each other. It is called Eucharist because give thanks, and the Lord's Supper because Jesus instituted it on the night He was betrayed, but it is communion because we are brought together by it to be the church with Christ.

Lastly, the final mark is our prayers. Last Thursday, we attempted a prayer meeting online using the computer program Zoom to bring five pastors from five different churches and traditions together, and then broadcasting it on Facebook Live. The technology end did not go well, and if I'm honest, when I watched some, it was a little amusing to see my colleagues so earnestly in prayer while I am trying to pray and also be looking all over the screen trying to figure out how to get it to work properly.

But even with all of those technical difficulties, the prayers were said together and the prayers were heard by God who does not need our Facebook Live feed to hear our prayers. I assure you God is listening. It may feel sometimes like God is not because we are all praying for what we think should happen and we all have our own views on what we think God should be doing.

God is listening and we should continue to share our hearts, our thoughts and our opinions, and lament when it feels like God is not listening because our lament is a prayer too. What good is it if we just resigned ourselves to a defeatist attitude of “God’s going to do what God’s going to do” and stop praying? Lament, being upset with God, praying in the face of that feeling of not being heard is an important part of our prayer life. Keep praying. Keep expressing your frustration. Keep confessing your sin. Keep asking for help. Keep giving thanks. Keep praising God. Keep professing your faith.

We follow the teachings, we share a common life, we break bread, and we pray because the God who made all things was humble enough to become part of that creation to live like you, share your life and limits, die for you and rise again, all for you. This God loves you and knows you by name. The church is the people who see this as good news, and respond to it.

So, no matter what happens as we come back, look for the church to be the church. We may never get back to what we have called normal until a vaccine or reliable treatment is available. But we can still be the church that hears the voice of our Shepherd and can find our place in this community of those called by His voice, then go in and out of the sheepfold to bring more people to the realization that God is calling them to know they are loved as well.

Some who watch are far away, but they are part of this fold. Technology allows this to happen. Those of you who read this sermon, you are a part of this fold. The post office allows this to happen. This is not how I have ever imagined church, but it is the church. It is a beautiful thing we have here. We are called by the voice of our shepherd, our God and our Lord, to go in and out, to be the church and bring all into the sheepfold, not by coercion or force, but by love. Amen