

**Making Church Accessible  
A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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Text: John 10:1-10**

So how'd you get here this morning? By car? On foot? Anybody ride a bike? How long did it take you?—10 minutes? 30 minutes? 30 seconds? (okay, that's for me!). Fully 35% of our current membership lives outside our defined core neighborhood, and may drive nearly an hour to get here. Now think about what you had to do in order to sink into a pew by [8:30] [11 o'clock]. First you had to decide whether to attend worship or not. In the not-too-distant past, most American families made Sunday morning worship part of the weekly routine; they didn't consult a calendar or check the schedule; they just did it. Today, worship has lots more competition from school activities, team sports, recreational pursuits, and increasingly, from time for "catch-up work." You probably had to set an alarm, instead of enjoying the luxury of sleeping late. If you are responsible for someone besides yourself, you may have had to "encourage" them to get ready. Maybe you took time for breakfast, or maybe you entrusted your growling stomach to the donut holes at coffee hour. When you think about it like this, it's a wonder anyone is here! Congratulations!

So, how'd you get here this morning? Harried and tired? Eager and excited? With a sense of duty or dread? Did you look forward to seeing friends and enjoying conversation together? An elderly member with whom I lunched recently confessed that he didn't come to worship too often any more though once he'd been active. "My friends have died or moved on," he said wistfully, "I don't recognize many in the congregation any more." On the other end of the age spectrum I've heard young people balk at participation in youth events until they know who else of their peer group will be there.

Church needs to be a place where maybe not everybody knows your name, but some people do. And where they like you and can talk with you about something besides the weather.

Did you come with expectation that the efforts you made to get here would be worth it? I'm sensitive to the experience of the church member I heard about who got pulled aside following one Sunday service and accused by the minister of sleeping through the sermon. "How can you form an opinion of what I've said if you're not even awake to hear it?!" The church member responded, "Well, pastor, sleep IS an opinion." Dozing in worship is a universal experience on occasion, but if boredom overtakes you every week, you're probably not inclined to go for a perfect attendance pin. At the other extreme are those for whom the discomfort of perspectives that challenge their own makes it difficult to feel a sense of sheltering fellowship in God's house. It's never my goal to make people uncomfortable; I do want us all to grow in our ability to engage uncomfortable topics, together, in full assurance of our mutual respect and love.

These very practical questions and concerns are important to consider because each reflects a potential barrier to gathering with the people of God for worship. *It's too far, it's too early, it's too late, we're too busy, it's too much trouble, I don't know anyone, it's too political, I don't get anything out of it.* I've heard them all, over the years, and said a few of them myself, when the lure of lingering over coffee and the Sunday *NY Times* was just too enticing to pass up (before showing up at church became a job requirement!).

Today's gospel text witnesses to the accessibility of church, though you might not think so at first reading. Here, couched in metaphors that would have been familiar to the ancient church, Jesus speaks about welcome, about connection and belonging, about protection and freedom from fear. Curiously but significantly, this very Scripture reading has been used at times to restrict accessibility, to narrow the opening through which people are drawn into relationship with the flock and the Shepherd. It has been used to authorize the church's role as gatekeeper, to judge who is or is not welcome, and to

determine what credentials must be presented in order to gain entry. But that interpretation seems counter to the One who contrasted his purpose with forces that threaten to hurt and divide the flock: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Listen for God’s Word in the reading from the gospel according to John, in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter at the first verse: [JOHN 10:1-10]

The metaphors Jesus uses in this short text provide the key to understanding how he makes life accessible to all. Here he actually moves back and forth between describing himself both as shepherd and gate of the sheepfold with the same strong verb form used throughout John’s gospel. “I am,” Jesus announces at various points, “the light of the world,” “the bread of life” “the true vine,” and “the resurrection and the life.” In different ways, all these images reflect a singular truth: Jesus offers what is necessary for life.

Though Jesus’ first followers would have easily related to the work of a shepherd and the construction of a sheepfold, it’s not so obvious to us. Throughout Scripture, the image of a ruler as the shepherd of the flock refers to a relationship of trust, in which the Shepherd desires only good for the flock, and the flock responds gladly to his voice, assured of their Shepherd’s care. Both metaphors refer to broad, even sacrificial love. In fact, one commentator pointed out that rural sheepfolds in Jesus’ time had no “gate” –just an opening in the rock enclosure. The shepherd would sleep in the opening, literally laying down his life to protect the flock. The shepherd knows the sheep so well he can call each one by name. He leads them out to find nourishing green pastures and refreshing still water, and brings them home safely as the darkness descends. It’s a comforting picture, characterized so well in the beloved Psalm we recited earlier. *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

Did you notice how the gate portrayed in this text is different from what we often think of as a barrier like a toll booth or a border checkpoint? Here there is no hint of payment required; no riddle must be solved in order to cross; no pedigree or proof of citizenship must be shown; no magic words have to

be pronounced or creeds affirmed. The gate is not a line drawn to distinguish between “us” and “them.” We’re not the ones to evaluate; our job is to listen to the voice of the shepherd. We are called always to be witnesses, not judges; telling what we know through experience is the One who has brought us from death to life, that it’s good, that it’s forever. I believe this picture of Jesus as the gate provides the foundation for our practice of open communion; at Fairmount all who feel drawn to Christ are welcome to receive the bread of life and the cup of salvation, because we all come at Christ’s invitation, through the door opened when he lay down his life for us. We demonstrate this even more vividly when we receive communion through intinction, coming forward and going back and finding food and friendship through Christ.

One other thing to notice about the image of Jesus as the gate: it opens both ways. The shepherd calls us in and leads us out. The gate is the passage between the safety of the sheepfold and the rugged realities of the outside world: where there is beauty and terror; green pastures and Death Valley. Jesus calls us to both. We follow, not because we’re mindless sheep, but because we trust the Shepherd who leads us there to rescue the vulnerable, to guide to safety those who are lost, to feed and nourish ones who are hungry and lonely. Notice that the writer of Psalm 23 doesn’t claim to be fearless; but that he “will fear no evil;” we need not fear that evil will triumph; we need not fear that the forces of death are stronger than those of good; we need not fear that life is for nothing....because *Thou art with me.*

The saving part of that is experienced as the flock moves between the two, in response to the voice of its Shepherd. In through the gate to the sheepfold for rest; out through the gate to the pasturelands. Into the sanctuary; out into the world. In to worship; out to serve. Do you see? Abundant life is more than survival now and heaven later. There’s a rhythm and a grace to it that produces peace and freedom from fear, today as well as tomorrow. Christ has made the true life 100% accessible for saints and sinners and seekers of all kinds. The

community called by his name is still trying to catch up, by reflecting that rhythm and grace in our ministry and mission. The church is a flock in a surprisingly isolated world. A 2006 study found that Americans are “far more socially isolated” than we were in 1985. Twenty-five percent of us say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal problems, which is more than double the number of two decades ago. Even with the rise in internet sites like MySpace and Facebook, there remains a profound longing to be known and supported, particularly in times of difficulty and stress. The number of people who said they had a neighbor as a confidante dropped by more than half in the past twenty years. (Shanker Verdantam, “Social Isolation Growing in US, Study Says,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 2006, A03) The sense of alienation and dis-ease is so widespread, it’s even been given a name; and we are reminded in a hundred ways every day we live in a “VUCA” world: marked by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

People need church now perhaps more than ever before. A sanctuary of safety; a flock in which they are known intimately and to which they belong unconditionally; a shelter in which to find strength and sustenance to live without fear of evil in an insecure and complex world.

Friends, Jesus has done the heavy lifting on this one: to make our church more accessible requires only that we reflect in our life together his wide welcome. We do that formally through the ministry of Deacons and Stephen ministers, in small groups and fellowship events. But nothing matters more than personal interaction with others. Have you considered what a powerful witness you make to others, simply by your presence here? You become an instrument of Christ’s peace, a way for them to experience the joy of Divine love and unconditional acceptance. Crossing the aisle to greet someone you don’t know, taking the time to spend some time at coffee hour, calling up a person whose name is on the prayer list---each of these helps throw open the imposing doors of our church and helps members and strangers alike know they are welcome. One Fairmount family shared with me recently that they have

taken to sitting in a different place in the sanctuary during worship, just to meet some new people. And yes, they've occasionally greeted someone who turns out to be a 30-year member, but what once may have felt like an embarrassing faux pas, now becomes an opportunity to laugh and acknowledge a new friend! Because knowing people's names constitute such an important part of approaching them, we'll be introducing a permanent name tag system later this Summer. "Vision 100" is a picture of what we hope Fairmount will look like nine years from now, as we celebrate our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Though it developed from your responses in the visioning exercises we did last year, along with research, prayer and reflection by the leadership team, it really grows out of the biblical picture painted in this, and many other texts. We are connected one to another because we are all members of God's beloved flock. We are invited and welcomed, which gives us the confidence to invite and welcome others. We are renewed by our Shepherd Jesus Christ who leads us in and out, providing all we need to grow and thrive. So how do we get there? South African Archbishop and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize Desmond Tutu has commented, "When I stand before the throne of God and am required to account for my life, I do not believe God will inquire about what I have done or left undone. I believe the question our Lord will ask of us all is very simple: 'Where are the others?' May God give us grace that we may answer, "Here we are, together."

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS! AMEN.

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