

Confirmation Sermon
December 27, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

John 10:1-10

[Jesus said:] "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

It's Confirmation Sunday! And nothing about this is... normal. I'll be the first to admit that this is a strange day, a strange Confirmation Sunday.

First of all, it's December. December! Typically Confirmation Sundays happens at the end of the school year, in May, or sometimes, June. But December! After Christmas. When it is cold and gray and dead-feeling outside... So strange.

Secondly, we're online. This global pandemic has forced us to make some changes in the way we worship. And, though it's been good for us to learn to think outside of the box and develop new skills, still... to not do our Confirmation Sunday in person feels strange, and also a little sad.

Thirdly, I'm taking a new call in a few weeks. Usually when I preach these confirmation sermons, I'm preaching to young people with whom I am looking forward to continued relationship. But today, I preach this, knowing that I won't get to see Maddie and Vandon and Elizabeth continue to grow up – at least, not in the active way I would if I were your pastor.

So how do we approach such a day, such a strange, not-at-all-normal day?

Let's try this. I'm going to begin by framing this whole confirmation sermon in my experience of being a parent. In my almost-eleven years as a parent, I've learned something surprising, something I didn't really appreciate before becoming a mom, and that is, *parenthood is about grief*.

I had a pastor friend who told me, years before Matt and I had children, that parenthood was grief-work. Being a mother, being a father, means a lifetime of working through grief. Here is this tiny, precious, vulnerable person, and as a parent, it's my job – and Matt's job – to keep her alive, to feed him, to change her, to teach him... everything! But in just a matter of moments, this precious little person grows up and

goes out into the world; this little baby leaves home, leaves *me*, to go make something of himself, herself.

Being a parent is like having a piece of your heart torn out, and walking around in the world. A little piece of your heart – this tender, vulnerable piece of your heart – is out there in Des Moines or Chicago or Paris or Botswana... or New Jersey... or God knows where else. No matter how old the child gets, no matter how long the baby's been out of the house, a parent will always wonder: How can I know that my baby will be okay? What if my baby *isn't* okay? What if my baby gets hurt, gets stomped on, gets taken advantage of, gets his heart broken, loses her sense of self? Parenthood has a lot to do with grief.

In our scripture passage for this morning, from the Gospel according to John, there's this one part of the passage that really grabs me on this strange day. One little sentence, five little words: "The sheep hear his voice."

There it is. There's the answer to every parent's question *How can I know that my baby will be okay?* "The sheep hear his voice."

When our babies are young, we bring them to this place, we take them to the font at the front of the sanctuary, and a minister pours some water on their precious heads and speaks these words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In that moment, in baptism, we make a bold claim: our babies are not our babies. Our children are not our children. They don't belong to us. They belong to God.

When they choose to be confirmed – like Elizabeth, Vandon and Maddie are doing today – when our babies grow up and decide to officially declare their faith in front of God and everyone and join the church, they continue to remind us that their lives are beyond our control. Their lives, their faith journeys, belong to someone who loves them even more than we do: they belong to the God who claims them and calls them by name, even when that means calling them further and further from our grip.

So as our babies grow up, and in many ways grow further from us, we have this promise. We have these words. "The sheep hear his voice." Because they belong to God, our babies, our children, our teenagers, have a shepherd. They may be far from *us* sometimes, but they are never far from the One who created them, who treasures them, who surrounds them with grace upon grace. They will hear the shepherd's voice. And the shepherd will lead them to life.

Maddie, Vandon, Elizabeth: you are making a grown-up decision today. No one has made you do this. On your own, with your own heart and your own mind, you are deciding to declare your faith in front of these faithful people, and to join the rest of us in trying to be the Church together. As you grow with us, with the imperfect and holy Church of Jesus Christ, you may find your faith strengthening, your love for God growing, your sense of God's call on your life becoming even more powerful. But, if you're like me, if you're like some of us here, you may get a little bit lost, a little bit confused, a little bit frustrated, from time to time. Life will let you down. Your parents will let you down. The church will let you down. But when that happens, remember that as

imperfect as we adults are, as imperfect as the church is, our God – the God who claimed you in your waters, and the God who claims you now – is perfect. God will never let you down. God loves you even more than we do. “The sheep hear his voice.”

Today is part of the journey of parents, and the rest of us, too, to let go of our children just a little bit. To let them make one of their most important grown-up decisions, and to trust where that decision – where that God – is leading them from here. But by the grace of God, we can do this: we can entrust Vandon and Maddie and Elizabeth to their Maker, to the One who created them, the One who claims them, who calls them out, to the One who loves them more than we ever could.

“The sheep hear his voice.” They’re going to be okay. Maddie, Elizabeth, Vandon: you’re going to be okay. In this strange pandemic, in this imperfect church, as you grow and grieve and celebrate and live... today, tomorrow, and in all the days to come, God has got you.

Thanks be to God.