

April 13, 2008  
Fourth Sunday of Easter

### “Options”

1 Peter 2:19-25

*For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

John 10:1-10 Words of Christ

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*

*So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and 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.”*

Sermon

We love options, don't we? Or at least we think we love options. When you buy a car or computer you can't just say, "I'll take it" and be done with the transaction. No, you have to run through the options; Do you want OnStar on your new car? GPS navigation system? Automatic windshield wipers? Do you want expanded memory on the computer? A protection plan? Expanded Wifi? A webcam? And we like these options. They help us tailor a purchase to our needs.

But sometimes options aren't so good. If I go someplace at 5 a.m. and say I want a cup of coffee, I don't want options. I don't want to choose, and frankly my brain isn't even capable of choosing between Hazelnut, blueberry, guava java or Liberian supreme. I just want a simple cup of coffee. There is a time for options and a time for no options.

Today's Gospel lesson seems to give us a lot of options when it comes to figuring out what Jesus is saying. Jesus speaks in a parable with many, many images. We've got a sheep pen, sheep, thieves and robbers, a gatekeeper, the true shepherd, and door and pasture; lots of things to interpret. It can be rather challenging.

We've got the bad guy or guys of whom our text says, *“He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber.”* The most obvious people Jesus would be talking about is the Pharisees who are right in front of Him. Our

Gospel lesson is spoken to some Pharisees after asking “Are we also blind?” to which Christ replied, “*If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains.*” It seems right that this parable is condemning them. But Christ also says, “*All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.*” That sounds a lot like the false prophets in the Old Testament. And then He says, “*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*” That makes me think of Satan himself.

We’ve also got to deal with the sheep; Are they the Jews, all believers, all the world? And who is this gatekeeper? Is it God the Father, or the Holy Spirit, or maybe even John the Baptist who points to the Christ?

The fact is, you can make a decent argument for all of these interpretations. It’s no wonder that verse six says “*This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.*” Even with eyes that see Christ’s work of salvation in His death and resurrection nearly 2000 years later, theologians and laity alike have some trouble figuring this one out. It almost makes one whisper under their breath, “Jesus, you just gave us too many options in this one.”

So Jesus clears things up. He doesn’t clear up all the imagery in the parable, but He clears up what is important in the parable. He clears it up by beginning to use first person pronouns. He says “I.” He says “me.”

*“I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and 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.”*

And it’s kind of odd that our lectionary decided to stop there, because Jesus continues in this same vein. “*I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.*” “*I lay down my life for the sheep.*” “*I lay down my life that I may take it up again.*”

So while there may be some options in some points in interpretation, there are no options when it comes to Christ. We know this. We know Jesus is the one of whom Yahweh spoke through the prophet Ezekiel, “*And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.*”

No options. There is one shepherd and He has His sheep that He knows by name. His sheep know His voice and they follow Him. That’s us. We may have not always been His sheep, but He has called us and we follow. Peter writes, “*For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*” We have found Him; the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Him.

So, stop looking for other options! OK, I trust that nobody in here is overtly looking around for another way into heaven. We know Christ Jesus is our Lord, savior and the only door to everlasting life. We hear His voice and are following Him...but it is in our following that temptation, sin and the devil are trying to point us toward alternatives. For example, the Pharisees thought they could climb over the fence into the kingdom of God by self-righteous works, but we can pick that same option and find ourselves in danger of climbing out. If we take up the option of self-righteousness, thinking we’re something because we are such a good person by worldly and ethical standards, then we’re not trusting in the righteousness of Jesus. We’re not following our good shepherd.

Or we tell ourselves we’ll follow our good shepherd, but also want the option of lust and sexual immorality. We know our salvation is through Christ, but we also want to hold onto the

option of watching whatever we find titillating and downright dirty in movies or on the internet. We say we love our shepherd, but when it comes to matters of sex in our lives and minds, well, we just kind of tune His voice out when He calls.

And when it comes to matters of offense and transgressions on the part of another person, we love to choose the grudge option. We follow Christ, knowing He has suffered and died to forgive all our sins, but when someone's done us wrong the idea of forgiving them doesn't occur to us. Or if it does, we choose instead to hold onto our just anger because, well, we're in the right. Why should we have to forgive? The idea of looking on that person with love and forgiveness just doesn't seem like an option for us.

And it isn't optional. We don't follow a savior with options. He is the shepherd who laid down His life for us, His sheep. He loved us completely, without any option to just tolerate us instead. He suffered horribly for us, with no option to do less. (Don't forget that He even turned down the pain-numbing gall that was offered Him at the cross.) He endured complete and utter forsakenness by the Father so that would might not. He didn't opt out of any part of it, but became the complete and total sacrifice for our sins.

We can't opt out of any part of following Him. We trust in His righteousness, not our own. We strive to make our bodies and minds follow His example in every way and not opt for the sin that was no part of Him. We don't choose the option of petty worldly greeds and hatreds, but emulate His love, care for others and forgiveness as best we can. This is what our shepherd's voice calls us to do through the Spirit and the Word. We can do no less because He is the only one we follow.

We don't do so perfectly on our own. But that is why we follow. We know the other tempting voices that call us lead to death and destruction. When those voices seem to have won us over and we've fallen into sin, we turn back to Christ Jesus in repentance and hear His voice saying, "Your sins are forgiven" and know that we are still His beloved sheep. We know that because of Him, death and condemnation is not an option for us. We know that He is taking us through this challenging and sinful world to a better, heavenly pasture. He has promised to forgive those who repent and believe. He has given Himself no other option. He died and rose that we might be able to follow Him in the only path where there is no other option except eternal salvation.

*"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."*