

*“Resist and Begin Again...A Blessed
New Normal”
May 3, 2020*

First Nudge: *“An Intentional
Belonging”
(Highlighting Wisdom shared
by Bishop Spong)*

John 10:1-10:
Before the Reading in John from Bishop
Spong:
In the early 6th century BCE, Judah was
attacked by the Babylonians led by
Nebuchadnezzar.

They were exiled to Babylonia as an
underclass of cheap labor. The most
difficult, fearful and traumatic
experience of Jewish history.

Finally, in the third generation of their
exile, King Cyrus of Persia, defeated the
Babylonians and allowed captive people
to return to their homelands.

This story is told by the writer of 2nd
Isaiah (Isaiah was actually written by 3
writers) as they return to what was left
of their former lives. He puts forth that
the Jewish people accept and learn to
live as powerless people, even in
freedom. What does that mean?

If they were to bless the world, it must
be done through what may be perceived
as weakness:

their never ending allegiance to non-
violent resistance.

They, like a lamb, must be willing to go
to the slaughter rather than meet
violence with violence.

They must be willing to absorb the
world’s hostility and return it as
transforming love.

A new kingdom: Power **with** and not
power *over*.

Victory through justice, not war.

*The Jewish people are to do what no
nation and no individual in human
history had ever before been called to
do; namely to transcend their own
survival instincts
and to give their lives away for others.

In this way alone, they could be *the
people* through whom all people of the
world would be blessed...a blessed new
normal.

It was an awesome call as a people, *but
not a popular one.*

So II Isaiah’s vision languished in
Jewish history, carried in the Jewish
consciousness as a kind of minority
report. Then...

In the first century of the Common Era,
a Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth
appears.

In his ability to love beyond the
boundaries of tribe, prejudice and
gender,
He calls a new community of people into
being.

A new humanity.

In His capacity to love beyond his own
security system, He enables his
followers to love in remarkably life-
giving ways.

In His courage to be Himself, He frees
others to be all that they could be.

In His unwillingness to retaliate for pain received, He creates a new sense of what it means to be human.

He is II Isaiah's lamb. He is the new human being.

Later, when John wrote his gospel near the end of the first century, he surrounded Jesus with images of II Isaiah's lamb. Jesus was the servant who suffered willingly **but** suffering is not the point, non-violent resistance is!

For John, then, the cross was not a place where the punishment for sin was received...or relieved,

but rather the place where the portrait of a life, no longer driven by survival alone, could be demonstrated.

This Jesus could drain from others the poison of their own anger, their fear, their destructiveness,

replacing it with a call to embrace a new humanity.

In this way, Jesus lived out a whole new understanding of community belonging and...God.

God was not the judge before whom we are expected to kneel with pleas for mercy and who controls us by guilt and fear. Quite the opposite. We are One.

The truth is that the pathway into divinity is identical with the pathway into the depths of our own humanity.

The more fully human, the more divine.

Christianity is not the story of God entering into the life of the human Jesus, so much as

it is the story of our transcending all of our limits, entering into the life of God as a new humanity.

In this way, let us be sheep! ~John Shelby Spong

Before John: This reading is not a metaphor. It doesn't line up one for one...God-the shepherd, Jesus- the gate, us- the sheep...we know it's not a metaphor because within this one reading Jesus calls himself both the shepherd and the gate.

Like Him, we may at times be several of the characters.

And so, what is Jesus wanting us to realize (about ourselves) through the image of shepherd, sheep, sheepfold, thief?

The sheepfold is at the center of today's wisdom teaching in John. Let's explore the story. First... **Read John 10:1-10**

Well, we know shepherds deeply care for the well-being of their flocks. And given the nature of sheep, the best way to care for them is to be sure they know you because they are followers...they need to know your voice...very well.

So shepherds come along side and begin talking and even singing to baby sheep right away so they are sure to know the sound of being called.

We sing lullabies to babies. God's been singing to you since you were a baby, sang creation into being, can you remember the sound of God's voice? Your song?

So the sheep are kept from being lost as/if they are listening. What are you listening to lately?

The shepherd goes first, a knowing community of sheep follows...one in which relationship has long formed.

The shepherd brings them back to the gate of the sheepfold safe at night.

Good shepherds care and stay with the sheep, each one important. Their effort is for well-being...of the sheep, and shepherd (livelihood), community (well-being).

This is a good shepherd. You are a good shepherd.

Thieves and bandits, false leaders, on the other hand, don't take the time to do all these things.

They hop over the fence as a shortcut or do an end round or quick fix. They sneak up on them and aren't known to them. They care about themselves and not for the well-being of the flock and the community it supports.

The text says: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." *However*, as Jack pointed out, some of these thieves and bandits are unwitting agents at the mercy of corruptly intended system...empire.

When may you have been the thief, bandit...unwittingly or not!?

It seems what truly sets the shepherd and the thief apart... is intention.

Maybe Jesus is inviting us to look at our intentions as we move through life.

...sometimes as the shepherd
(what are your true intentions in leading?)

...sometimes as the sheep
(who are you willing to follow...have you thought about their voice, their intentions?)

...sometimes as the thief

(have you examined your own short cuts and your intentions?)

Intentions.

OK. How about another, more modern sheep illustration?

Stockyards have long used a specially trained goat to deliver a pen of lambs to the meat packers. The goat knows the way through the maze of gates and the lambs merrily trot along behind. At the last possible moment, the goat steps into a side pen, while the lambs hear the clank of the heavy gate behind them. The lambs go onto become lamb chops.

The goat is awarded a candy bar and goes for another group of unwitting lambs. Realizing the goat doesn't design the system, and is actually another of its victims, the goats always carry the same name: the "Judas goat".

Every packing plant in America had one...
every community in America has some.

In the stockyard, the sheep are led by one whose intentions (or whose boss's intentions) are not for the well-being of the flock. There is no good shepherd for them...only a mutton pusher...a thief.

So...what will it be for you?

Stockyard or Sheepfold?

Mutton-pusher or Good Shepherd?

We choose...

We choose to follow all the time. Who will we follow?

We chose to lead all the time. Will we make our true intentions known?

We are the gate. We are the sheepfold. We are the shepherd. We are...the thief if we choose it.

What are our...what is your...true intention?

What truth does this story invite you to stop ignoring?

What are you to resist non-violently?

Easter is facing the truth living with our broken open hearts.

Easter invites us to breathe and think and start again!

We are the new humanity.

Second Nudge: *"Belonging Together"*

Read Acts 2:42-47, 1 Peter 2:19-25

As I have listened to you,
you have consistently identified one thing that draws you here to Tippe.

It is the sense of community and belonging where the fellowship is real,
where people have warm hearts, minds seeking truth,
where there is a trust in sharing your real self.

You don't have to hide here.
And what we do here together matters.

We don't ask you to waste any of your precious time
but rather invite you to invest it in things that make a difference in the world.

Awesome.

"Awe comes upon everyone because many wonders and signs are being done by the
apostles"...each of you!!

Genuine community is contagious because
of all it offers and because of our human need to belong.

We know:

My healing affects your healing...yours, affects mine. Community heals.

We come as often as possible because we never know which
Sunday/Monday/Wednesday you may need me for you and I may need you to be here
for me. Even on Zoom!

A salve of sorts for each other's little and large sufferings.
We need a salve for life is hard. There is "suffering".

Life was hard for Jesus. And he doesn't give in to it.

He doesn't play by their rules, the world's rules.
He breaks the pattern of an eye for an eye...
and starts a new way to be free in saying no to
violence, to injustice, to returning evil for evil!

For one and all. For the common good. People first.

He...a just, caring person...like Him,
a just, caring community lives beyond itself!

And you know, it's easier to care generously when in the excitement of new beginnings...whether that's a new love, a new job, a new home, new pastor, a new church.

But then, people being people, reality sets in...
actually, unreality sets in. The newness wears off!

We seem to get mind boggled, lose our way,
and our focus. Resist being part of community....maybe we come to think we don't
"need" to be in community to connect the dots of our lives and make meaning of being
alive.

Often, if we're doing a bit better, we forget how foundational to that very "better" *being part of true community is!*

We forget what it is that brought us together initially,
the desire to make meaning of our lives beyond our daily lives, to enjoy our lives.

This takes a lot of energy...doesn't it?

It's often easier to complain, focus on what's not going well,

We become well defended and defensive. *Or just leave.*

But those in that earliest church...had an energy and a joy, an urgency to make meaning that sustained them.

They broke the old patterns...and they grew in number...
not because they solicited anyone to join them as much as others saw what they were doing...

saw the saving grace and meaning in what the community was doing and the fruits of the spirit. It was self-energizing.

Where, how, when...did the "Church" go so wrong?
When did so many of us become more about "me" than "us"?

When? When we stop growing our understandings of others and taking on our own accountability in the way things are.

When we stopped looking to re-form ourselves and so our community...

when we become afraid of the future and re-member the past to be better than it really was...

and so aren't really living in the present...
we lose our way and we all suffer for it.

And the story in Acts might more commonly sound like
this in the 21st century church so many know:

They devoted themselves to the traditions of their grandparents, to the meetings; to raising money, and to hanging on for dear life, no matter what might change around them.

Everyone around was indifferent to them or worse,
for no one could remember the last time they had done anything worthy of attention,
which was truly the help needed.

And all the members lived in discordant silence, each one holding on to firm opinions.

Whatever they owned, they kept, and shared only as much as they felt like sharing, with people they felt they knew, and felt were worthy.

Anyone who was in need never dared admit it.

They valued order above all: order in worship, order in meetings, predictability in life, moderation in all things.

They came to worship when they wanted to, and went right home afterward.

They stayed in their homes, except for brief and orderly visits with well-known friends.

They thanked God that they were not like other people, especially people who lived in big cities, or faraway places where tourists never go.

People in general had no opinion of them at all or a bad opinion.

Every day their number decreased, as God took away from them those who were saved...saving themselves from harm.

BUT we can be new people, a new church, humanity...start again!

This could be our story:

They reflect upon and devote themselves to the wisdom of the shared promptings of the spirit that comes to them through worship.

They devote themselves to reflective Bible study becoming aware of the worshipful

work they are called to do within their own hearts. Focus is on themselves and not others.

They devote themselves to living reflectively, learning together, in faith, the issues of the day and the needs of others and act on it.

They devote themselves to fellowship...really caring about each other's lives.

They pray together and stay together and play together.

Everyone around them is in awe—all those acts of service in the community, so many people helped!

All of them, young and old, live in harmony listening to each other, not going silent on each other.

No one holds back from sharing...giving freely what God gives them. When anyone is in need, heads, hearts, and hands are joined; skills are offered, resources pooled, and pockets emptied.

They all made worshiping together a priority...that is,
Being One with God a priority.

They visit in one another's homes, and share meals often.

Whenever they meet—at church, in their homes, at work, on the street—they are glad to see each other, don't look the other way.

People in general like what they see.

Every day their number grows as God adds those who were are saved...from themselves.

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The truth is, of course, that our church, like all churches, slides along a continuum of care...cause life is constantly changing....and challenging.

Where do you see Tippe on the continuum? ...YOURSELF?

Are you willing to be new again...to renew, reform yourself?

How is it you already belong?

Belonging is the antidote for the addiction most of us experience in our lives one way or another...as food, drugs, spending, working. Addicted? The antidote is to belong.



How would you like to belong...now?

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