

4th Sunday of Easter

When I became a pastor for the first time, I felt exhilarated to have new responsibilities and begin the kind of work I had long dreamed about. As with anyone starting a new job, I made my share of mistakes. Still do. Getting a new position means achieving some goal, but it also demands learning how to be a good leader. We may lean on experiences of the past and our vision for the future, but in practice we have to learn skills appropriate for the actual situation and become a good shepherd for a particular flock.

Jesus spins a tapestry of images for a good shepherd. He's contrasting his leadership with that of the Pharisees, who will soon arrange his arrest. After the verses we heard today, Jesus famously calls himself the good shepherd, but here he calls himself something else: the gate for the sheep. Other people are shepherds; some enter the sheepfold through the gate, but others enter elsewhere, climbing over a wall to access a place where they can steal sheep.

A good shepherd calls his own sheep by name, enters a comfortable relationship with them, and walks ahead of them. This shepherd earns the trust of the sheep. The person who breaks into the fold frightens the sheep, who then run away. Jesus calls himself the gate; the good shepherds enter through him. He says all this in front of the Pharisees who have not figured out that if he is the gate, they are the thieves and robbers gaining access to the flock not through the gate but climbing in elsewhere to steal and slaughter and destroy.

Priests like me are called pastors because of this image. We're supposed to be shepherds who enter through the gate of Christ to lead the sheep. But the image applies to everyone no matter what responsibility you hold at work, at school, at home, or at church. We are to gain access to the flock through the proper gate, not by climbing over elsewhere to advance our wishes and to crush those of the flock. That gate may be the development of natural abilities, advanced education in the field, or apprenticeship through some mentor. Leaders seek a proper gate through which they gain access.

Jesus wants to be that gate. He wants to be the portal through which will walk shepherds who care for the sheep, learn their names, lead them along the right path, and then step in front so the sheep will follow in trust.

When we first become a leader, we may feel full of ourselves. We think grandly of who we are, take pride in our skills, and seize opportunities for things finally to go the way we always wanted. Sometimes there's merit in that: If we are good at what we do, people respect that. But every so often we should perform self-analysis. Through which gate exactly are we leading the sheep? Is it the gate of those who gave us authority, or is it the gate of our own ego? Jesus says, "I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.... I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly." Our responsibilities may be slim or vast, but people under our care will receive abundant life if we lead them through Christ the gate.