



## First United Church of Oak Park

### **Not Just for Quicksand Anymore**

John 10

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Sheep in a sheepfold. This image, this metaphor, this parable — it would have made perfect sense to those living 20 centuries ago in Israel. The emotional resonances would be immediate and potent. But for a guy like me who grew up in Chicago in the 1980s? Not so much. But luckily enough, I know somebody who knows exactly what a sheepfold is and why it is important: my wife Heather.

She didn't grow up on a farm or anything. She grew up in Brooklyn. She grew up on egg creams and bialys, not shepherds' crooks and sheepdogs. But, nevertheless, about 15 years ago found my wife Heather working as a shepherd in Western Massachusetts in the Berkshires. I don't mean a figurative shepherd; I mean a literal herder of sheep, 300 some odd Icelandic sheep, to be specific. But this sheep farm was just getting started, and for the months that Heather worked there, there was one critical piece of sheep-herding equipment that Heather and her sheep did not have: a sheepfold.

A sheepfold is a wood or stone enclosure with walls about three or four feet high. And the lack of this sheepfold caused no end of trouble. There was just a weak portable electric fence that the more motivated sheep would constantly break through to go off and pursue their sheepy dreams of greener pastures.

On one occasion, this meant that the whole flock broke loose and ran off into a nature preserve. These unwitting sheep did not

understand that the fence stopped them from going into the nature preserve because it was filled with quicksand. Did you know there was quicksand in Massachusetts? I sure didn't. They lost some of the sheep and had to rescue some of the others, but rescuing sheep from quicksand is, in itself, a pretty likely way to get oneself sucked into quicksand. All that trouble, just because they didn't have a good sheepfold.

And a sheepfold isn't just for quicksand, either. A sheepfold is all you need to protect the sheep from even the most tenacious predators. And it does so in a very clever way. In Jesus' day, the sheepfold was there because of the threat of wolves. For Heather, the predators were coyotes. But how are you going to keep the coyotes away from your sheep with just a three- or four-foot-high wall? Coyotes can jump pretty high, higher than you would expect.

But that's the thing. The wall of a sheepfold doesn't need to be tall enough to stop coyotes from jumping over it. It just needs to be tall enough to keep the sheep from jumping over it. And sheep can't jump very high. A sheepfold doesn't keep the coyotes out, it keeps the sheep in. It keeps the sheep together. Because by keeping the sheep together, they can't be scattered. Old sheep and sick sheep and lambs can't be singled out and picked off by predators, because the enclosure keeps the sheep from being scattered. The predators have to tangle with the strongest sheep instead of the vulnerable. And night after night, week after week, month after month, all the sheep would be safe, just because of a sheepfold. Because they couldn't be scattered.

Everybody listening to Jesus spin this metaphor about sheepfolds would have understood all too well the value of keeping a flock of sheep together and the danger of having the flock scattered. But while many of Jesus' listeners did herd literal sheep, Jesus is not talking about sheep. This is a parable. The sheep stand in for

people, and the sheepfold stands in for something, too. The sheepfold stands in for the community of faith, for beloved community where people stick together, becoming something stronger than any one individual, something that will keep them from getting scattered or leaving the vulnerable to fend for themselves when the wolves are at the door.

This community of faith is important. Our relationships and shared interests are important. These things bring people joy in ordinary times. And in the face of peril or predator or pestilence, this community makes the difference between life and death. Because there is every chance of our being scattered right now — isolated, left to fend for ourselves. Because there is every chance that we as a people will be asked to choose between the value of a dollar and the value of a human life. The strong and well-off will maybe be okay, but the vulnerable?

Even though our life together as a church is hugely transformed, our building is still a critical platform for our ministry. Two and a half times as many people are coming to the food pantry as did before the shutdown, and to serve that many people while maintaining safe distance means that the food pantry has had to spread out to use almost the whole building. You can be proud that the church building you own is serving a critical community need.

When we tie on a facemask just to step out the door, or cancel youth mission trips, we are doing it because it keeps our communities' elders and those with weakened immune systems safe. These losses hurt, and they are for a noble purpose.

We must stick together, First United, together in this sheepfold. We must be together when storms comes, or wolves come sniffing after our young people, or try to drive out the sick among us, or isolate our elders as if they are of no worth.

We can't keep these things from coming around. A world that is free from threats is not a world that is on offer. But keeping threats a country mile away is never what a sheepfold was intended to do. A sheepfold keeps a community together in the face of threat, and when we are together, we are strong, together as a united community of faith.