

John 10:1-10

‘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. <sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. <sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.’ <sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

### **Are You in Church?**

Seems like a silly question: There’s sign on the corner that calls this a church. You walked in the door. There are prayers and music and a pastor speaking to you. So you think, “Of course, I’m in church.”

But if you remind yourself that... “a church is not a building, a church is not a steeple, a church is not a resting place, a church is a people,” and it’s not just any people but a certain kind of people who have something in common, you might think otherwise. A church is a people who strive to love, to love God, to love one another, and to love self. And if we do indeed love God, we certainly love Jesus, and if we love Jesus we strive to follow his commandments (that’s what he says: “If you love me...John 14:15), and when we commit ourselves to love Jesus and love one another, we are creating a covenant between us. The church is not just any people; the church is a covenant people.

Today I would like us to delve into what it means to be “in church” and have us ask ourselves honestly, “Am I in Church?” – with emphasis on the word “I.” Because you can be amidst other people who ARE in church, while you yourself are NOT. Martin Luther speaks of the “hidden” church as the true church. The true church is not everyone who shows up for a worship service but rather those who truly are IN CHRIST (according to Luther)

Our Gospel reading is a lovely metaphor of what being in Christ is all about: We are like sheep who are so familiar with our shepherd that we recognize his voice over all other voices, that we respond to him, that we feel safe and secure in his presence, that we trust him, indeed that we love him, and that we obey him. That’s what being in Christ is all about.

And being IN CHRIST by extension, means being in God, which, by extension, means being in love. That’s what John says in his first Epistle: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:8). You can hardly be “in God” and thus “in Christ” if you are hateful or

deceitful. So it would be hard to claim that you are in church if you are not a loving person; you are, rather, in a building that's called a church with other people who may or may not be in Church, and as I said earlier a true Church is a COVENANT people who are in covenant with God and with one another. That true Church is hidden from our eyes; you cannot know if the person sitting next to you is IN CHRIST. That person may have acted in malicious ways toward you, but remember that it was in the past, and that person may be here now to ask forgiveness. Conversely, that person may smile at you, may say nice things to you, may be kind to you, but you don't know that person's heart of hearts. God is the only one who sees the human heart in truth, which is why Jesus tells us not to judge others, and to take care of the LOG in our own eye rather than worry about the speck in someone else's.

So being IN CHURCH involves looking INWARD first and foremost. What are MY feelings toward others? Am I willing to forgive? Am I seeking what is best for someone else? And you can tell from such questions that none of us are perfect. That means that we each have plenty to work on IN OURSELVES without getting distracted by the sins of others. We all need to grow in love. John writes that God is in essence LOVE, thus LOVE is a perfect thing – The Greeks have six words for love, beginning with EROS which is sexual love, but the word that the New Testament uses to describe the Christian love is the word AGAPE, which means LOVE FOR EVERYONE. Paul does a great job of defining AGAPE love for us, reminding us also that we are NOTHING without love.

What is love according to Paul? It's patient. It's kind. It's not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth (that's interesting how he connects WRONG-DOING to UNTRUTH, to LIES – If you spread lies, you're not in love and not IN CHURCH. Love bears all things, believes all things – that too is interesting because we often think of being a Christian as a set of beliefs, and anything outside of that is HERESY. Paul is not talking about belief in doctrine, but more about trust in God - Love hopes all things. Love endures all things.

THAT'S A LOT, AND I THINK I'M SAFE IN SAYING THAT NONE OF US EMBODY TRUE LOVE PERFECTLY. WE ARE ALL DEFICIENT IN SOME WAY. I gave my confirmation students homework – to read 1 Corinthians 13 and think about what aspect of love is the most difficult for them to follow:

- Do they have hard time being patient with others?
- Do they get their kicks from causing problems for other people?
- Do they insist on getting their own way?
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We are all deficient in love.

But the key to being a Christian is to STRIVE to LOVE, to STRIVE to be more kind, less malicious, to be truthful. AND THE ONLY WAY TO DO THAT IS FOR US TO LOOK HARD AT OURSELVES RATHER THAN OTHERS. I confess that I have little patience with people who denigrate others, people who make racist comments, who stereotype, who cast aspersions on others, who only talk about other people's problems and who blame other people for their own predicaments.

**ARE THESE PEOPLE WILLING TO LOOK AT THEMSELVES AND THEIR OWN SINS? OR ARE THEY ONLY INTERESTED IN FEELING SUPERIOR TO SOMEONE ELSE BY PUTTING OTHERS DOWN?**

People, we can only love ourselves when we know who our true selves are, which means have to be honest and see ourselves as we are, not as we want others to see us. So because we are not perfect in love, but we seek to be in communion with God, we look honestly at ourselves and strive to GROW IN LOVE.

And that love is 3 dimensional : we love God, we love others, and we love SELF; I JUST MENTIONED THAT WE FIRST LOOK INWARD, AND SO THE FIRST DIMENSION OF LOVE THAT WE NEED TO NURTURE IS LOVE FOR SELF. Now some people look at themselves and see nothing but sin – They start feeling that huge weight of their sin. This is why it's so important to come to terms with God's unconditional love for you! Otherwise the weight of that sin is going to drag you to the bottom of the ocean, perhaps literally. In the time we spend in this worship service today, 5 Americans will commit suicide. So many others are committing slow suicide by poisoning their bodies. Others are acting in reckless ways that put their lives in danger from others, provoking others, starting fights, either urging violent behavior or committing violence themselves. How can these people claim to love themselves when they don't respect their own lives, their own health, their own relationships with others? This is where belief in Jesus Christ comes into play: God's love shed for all for the forgiveness of all sin. WHY? BECAUSE HE LOVES YOU! HE DOESN'T WANT YOU TO DESTROY YOURSELF!!

And this leads me to the second object of love; first we love ourselves, NEXT WE LOVE GOD! God has not only given you LIFE in the here and now (which I hope you would all agree is better than DEATH in the here and now). But God has given us a promise of eternal life, though we're not sure exactly how that will be played out. But we know that eternal life in God's kingdom is characterized by love, peace, and joy – this is God's perfect will for those who love him and seek to grow into his likeness, so how can you not love God? By not loving yourself – someone who was created in God's image - and by not loving others.

That's the third component of love – loving others, or more accurately, STRIVING to love others. Let me go back to the previous point: WE NEED TO LOOK INWARD TO OURSELVES, at the log in our own eye rather than the speck in someone else's. Among the people to be most pitied are the ones who ARE SO AFRAID TO LOOK AT THEMSELVES THAT THEY SPEND ALL THEIR TIME FINDING FAULT IN OTHERS. It's because they're afraid of seeing their own sin in all its hideous aspects. And I've seen people self-destruct spiritually by refusing to look inward. YOU CAN'T LOVE OTHERS UNTIL YOU FACE YOUR OWN SHORTCOMINGS COMPLETELY, REPENT OF THEM, ACCEPT GOD'S LOVE AND GOD'S GRACE, AND THEN STRIVE TO BE MORE LOVING, TOWARD YOURSELF, TOWARD GOD, AND TOWARD OTHERS.

And so I return to my first question? Are you in Church? Are you seeking God or looking for ways to justify your hatred of self or of others? Are you striving to grow in love, or are you striving for a self-righteousness that you believe comes from conforming to some doctrine? There is no doctrine that outweighs our calling to love God, to love others, and to love ourselves. I pray that something I said today (and I said a lot) would strike you, would move

you to grow in love, because when you grow in love, the bonds between us grow stronger, the bond between you and God grows stronger, and we you can answer the question “Are you in church?” in all sincerity, “Yes, I AM in Church.”