

A Place of Abundant Life

Sermon for April 26, 2026

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

⁷ So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me^[a] are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief

comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

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Last week a group met in my office, and someone commented on the beautiful door onto the hallway. A new door was the one change I asked for in the pastor's study when I arrived 6.5 years ago, and Mike S. installed a wonderful one, a well crafted wood door with a clear glass window.

Why did I ask for a new door? When I arrived, the door onto the hallway was in perfect condition, and solid. When the original door was put in, it was surely designed for the pastor's privacy when talking with congregants. And I do like to honor people's privacy - while recognizing the limits of safety. I have learned in ministry that pastors' doors should have windows. I can have private conversations that no one overhears, but if someone walks past my door, it should be clear with whom I'm meeting, and that nothing untoward is going on.

Last week in the final “lecture” of the class I teach to UCC students pursuing ordination, we talked about a minister’s obligation to protect the vulnerable. It may not be something that you think of often, in the pastor’s job description.

Preach. Lead Bible Study. Visit the sick. Offer reflections to Church Council. But it’s there, on the list: *Attend to the safety of the sheep of this flock.*

That has multiple parts. One part is to make sure that I *behave* in a way that is appropriate in relation to our members and our congregation and members of the community. One part is to ensure a safe environment here at Pilgrim, a community where people of all ages feel not just welcome, but supported in their wellbeing. So that Pilgrim Church is a place of life abundant. Another part of this responsibility is to be attentive to the safety of the sheep of this flock.

It’s right there in the Ministerial Code of the UCC which all pastors are expected to affirm regularly.

Ministerial Code:

“Act to prevent and to report known or suspected cases of physical or sexual abuse or neglect.”

And

“Honor all confidences shared with me, telling only those who need to know, what they need to know, when they need to know it.”

It's also in the laws of Massachusetts, by the way. Clergy are mandated reporters of harm done to children, elders, and people with disabilities. Particularly folks without agency or the ability to advocate for themselves. Not too long ago, pastors sometimes kept harmful secrets. Now, we are among those expected to protect people, *not* secrets.

This is not to say I go around telling people's business. But if someone is in harm's way, I see safety as paramount. It's not just a matter of legal obligation, it's a matter of shepherding safety, creating community, and upholding the dignity and worth of every person among us - especially the most vulnerable.

You might not see the connection to our scripture passage, so let me try to make it plain. When I read this text, with its references to sheep, sheepfolds, and shepherds, and its references to thieves and bandits that harm the sheep, I asked myself the question: who are today's sheep? Who are today's bandits? And today, who has a responsibility to protect vulnerable folks? Pastors (linguistically related to shepherds) have a responsibility to guide but also to protect. But actually, *we all* have a moral duty, a Christian calling, to ensure safety. The congregation as a whole has a responsibility to protect the vulnerable in our midst. Especially in our kind of church, a UCC church, the congregation has a shared and common responsibility to protect the children in our care. This is not just my work as a pastor, not just the work of our staff, not just the work of our Sunday School volunteers. This is our shared calling.

In a previous congregation, someone said this to the parents of a set of twins: I try to treat your kids with the love and care I would treat my own children. Rev. Cheryl Lindsay, reflecting on this passage, says that followers of Jesus are obligated to live faithfully “with the liberative, kin-dom based good news that Jesus not only proclaimed,

but modeled and generated in their life on earth.”¹ When we create *that* kind of community, that safe place for children and every group of vulnerable folks, what that means is that here, people feel safe and comfortable. Ideally, when children hear their name, here, it’s like what we hear in this morning’s text:

“..the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... they know his voice.”

At Pilgrim Church, one way we honor and uphold this responsibility through our Safe Church policy. You can read it on our website; it’s long. I asked Sarah to reflect on it, and she wrote:

“Safe Church is a commitment to put our faith into practice; living out God’s call to care for all people, especially children and the vulnerable. When we share in this commitment, our children are free to fully participate in worship, and experience Pilgrim as a place to grow in faith with safety, dignity, and belonging.”

¹ <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-by-the-gate-2/>

Sarah trains volunteers and staff in this essential responsibility. I try to remember to say to staff when they come on board that their first responsibility is to safety.

There have been times when religious institutions have prioritized their institution over safety, over justice, over mercy, over kindness. We don't have to spend too much time on who the writer of this morning's text thought the bandits of his own day were (I'll tell you that part troubled us in Bible Study). We can just look at today, wondering who is at risk and why - and thinking about our own priorities and responsibilities as followers of Jesus. Jesus is life and came that we might have life abundant. Jesus is the gate - both a guide and protection. Jesus is the good shepherd who keeps his sheep safe. And we are followers of the Way of Jesus, which means we are also shepherds. And this is a beautiful and holy part of our faith. When we are shepherds creating a kind and safe sheepfold, a place folks can trust, we follow Jesus in making abundant life possible, right here.

May it always be so. Amen.