

Knowing and Trusting
A Sermon on John 10:1-10 by the Rev. Philip Major
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One of the things that has made St. Paul's a strong, vital congregation for many years is that we have a large group of healthy, mature lay leaders. Our current wardens, Ieva Doyle and Joe Russo, are good examples. Neither one of these individuals asked to serve in this position. They had to be invited and convinced. Perhaps they were aware that serving as a warden would require many hours of their time each month.

In recent weeks our wardens took on additional leadership tasks that are not listed on their job description. Did some of you receive an invitation to the Bicentennial celebration in the mail? There was a team of people who worked together to make the invitations beautiful and accurate. But there was one person who spent many hours, shepherding the process through until those invitations arrived at the post office. Our Senior Warden, Ieva Doyle, was the person who oversaw the process, from start to finish.

Our newest warden, Joe Russo, took a similar, unexpected leadership role about six weeks ago. We've been preparing our building for our Bicentennial Celebration for more than a year. There was one task that was left undone. The choir hallway needed a fresh coat of paint. Joe Russo gathered a group of volunteers together to do the work. It required several weeks of work, but Joe organized and led the effort from start to finish.

In the church, we call this servant leadership. The idea comes from the way Jesus served as a leader. Jesus was not selfish. Jesus washed the disciples' feet. He had humility about himself and his role. Jesus did not expect everyone else to do all of the work. He took on the most difficult assignment for himself.

You may not know Ieva and Joe very well. They are not the kind of people who seek out the spotlight. I'm sure they are not happy that I am telling you about their work, but I'm sharing these stories for a reason. Joe and Ieva are healthy, servant leaders. We can learn from their example.

Ieva and Joe bring many intellectual and spiritual strengths to their work of leading at St. Paul's. They are mature, which means they don't get too excited or upset about the little things. They are creative and intelligent. Joe and Ieva are grounded in their faith; they have deep, resilient relationships with God. They are deeply engaged in the people and ministries of St. Paul's, but they don't spend every day of the week at the church, and they don't expect to be in the center of every conversation. They are not always the first people to share their thoughts and opinions, but I have learned that when Joe or Ieva tell me something I should pay attention. These are qualities that make them excellent wardens.

But there is one more thing that is essential for Ieva and Joe in their roles as wardens. They act in trustworthy ways. They are not selfish. They don't take advantage of the power that has been given them. They show respect for others and for the institution by following the rules. They are not afraid to express inconvenient truths. They are respectful of others, even those who disagree with them. They are more concerned with the truth than with winning the argument. Joe and Ieva act in ways that build trust among our members.

I hope you have the opportunity to get to know our wardens. I have no doubt you will learn they are people you can trust. It is easy to see these qualities of unselfishness and trustworthiness when you get to know them. Those of us who know them feel a strong connection; it's something we can rely on.

It's sometimes more difficult for us to feel that same sort of strong connection with God. We can't just set up a time to have coffee with God, the way we can with Ieva or Joe. We can't just dial God's number on the phone. Many times when we are trying to listen, it seems we don't hear God's voice speaking to us.

Yet, in the Bible, we are told God is the one we can trust above all others. In today's Gospel passage Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We want to have strong, resilient connections with the one who is the Good Shepherd, with the one who guides us and guards us.

It's not always easy to come to know and trust in God, the way we know and trust Ieva and Joe. How can we come to know and trust God? If someone tells you it's easy, if someone tells you there is a simple secret formula to follow, I just disagree with them. It's not easy, but this is what I have learned.

I've learned that my relationship with God is a real relationship. I have to pay attention and take care to maintain my part of the relationship, just as I have to do with every other relationship in my life.

Jesus' words and example are the unfailing guide for my life. But this relationship didn't just happen overnight, or in the heat of a single, emotional worship service. It takes time and energy to build trust and depth in our relationships, including in our relationships with God.

In my efforts to have a stronger relationship with God I've learned it's helpful to spend time each day in prayer. Prayer is not something that comes easily for most people, so we have to practice. We have to be willing to try something new when the old way of prayer doesn't work anymore. Just as is true for us in our human relationships, we need to seek out advice when prayer gets difficult.

As is true in other relationships, if my prayer relationship with God is one where I am constantly speaking and never listening, eventually the relationship will become fragile and less meaningful. Listening to God is one of the more challenging things to do in life. You may have noticed, God often speaks to us indirectly, or you might say she has a very soft voice. So we keep searching for places and situations where we might hear God speaking to us.

In my efforts to have a resilient, strong relationship with God, I've learned that Holy Scripture is my guidebook. Holy Scripture is the essential reference, kind of like a foundation for us in our relationships with God. When we stop paying attention to the stories and main themes of Holy Scripture, we get ourselves in trouble. Holy Scripture is the guidebook to our relationship with God.

Last summer I was hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and I decided to take a new trail. Unfortunately, I made one big mistake. I left my guidebook, the one that describes all of the trails in detail in the car. This was a foolish attempt to make my pack a little bit lighter.

This trail I took was rocky and steep. I was about three quarters of the way up the trail, when I came to a ledge. It was a narrow rock ledge with an enormous boulder on top of it. I couldn't see a way to go forward. I climbed back down because I decided this had to be the wrong way. I looked at both sides of the trail. It was very steep on both sides, which made it impossible to go around the ledge. I looked around for yellow blazes painted on rocks and trees. Sure enough, the yellow blazes led me right up onto that same ledge.

I climbed up on the narrow ledge and drank some water. There seemed to be no one else hiking on this trail. It was cool and damp. I was tired and discouraged and frightened. I took out my map and looked at it. It wasn't much help.

Eventually I noticed there was an opening under the boulder on one side. I pushed my daypack through the opening and squeezed in behind it. I found myself in a little cave. But there didn't seem to be any way out of the cave. I almost gave up and just went back down the trail to the bottom. Then I noticed there was light coming from a space under the boulder on one side. I decided to try to squeeze under the boulder and pushed my pack ahead of me. Eventually I came out on the other side of the boulder. Safely standing on the other side of the boulder, I couldn't believe that this was the way I was supposed to go. I still wondered where I had made a mistake, but there were more yellow blazes and I followed the trail to the top.

When I got back to my car I opened my guidebook and read the description of the trail. Guess what it said? In the middle of the description in the guidebook it says, *About halfway up the steep slope, the trail passes through a boulder cave called the Orange Squeezer.* I couldn't believe it! My day would have been so different if I had just been able to read my guidebook.

The Bible is our guidebook. Life is so different when we spend plenty of time reading our Spiritual guidebook. When we read the Bible, we learn some things we often forget or don't seem to understand. For instance, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings tell one hundred different stories about the ways autocratic rulers are constantly messing things up for the people they are supposed to be leading. In recent years it's been very helpful to be familiar with those one hundred different stories about the kings of Israel. In my relationship with God I have learned that life is much less frightening and much less discouraging if I pay attention to what it says in the guidebook, Holy Scripture.

In my relationship with God, I have learned that, for me, the single most important thing is to be part of a strong community of people who are seeking to be in a relationship with God. When we come together for worship, we have fifty or eighty or one hundred people whose intentions and energies are all going in the same direction. We are all seeking after God. This gives God fifty or eighty or even one hundred different ways to speak to us, because God often speaks to us through the words or the actions of other people.

When we are gathered together, we are sometimes able to act as the Body of Christ in the world. St. Paul describes the way the members of the church come together to form the body of Christ in his letter to the Corinthians. When we are gathered together in this place, we are sometimes able to give voice to God's intentions. For me, this is the most beautiful thing in the world.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We are like sheep. We often do not see the right way to go. We get ourselves into trouble. God's voice is the voice we need to follow, but sometimes we don't listen. Sometimes we don't know how or where we will hear God's voice. Even when we do listen, we don't always understand what God is saying to us.

So God has brought us together in this place to hear and understand what God is saying. We pray together. We read some passages from the most reliable guidebook we can find. Together we strive to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, the one whose words are trustworthy and true.