

Suttons Bay Congregational Church  
John 10:1-10

April 13, 2008  
Rev. Robin Long

1 "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. 3 The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." 6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

I like my last name. When I was a kid, Joe and Sheila Short, members of the church in which I grew up, used to come sit down beside our family at local restaurant after church and Mr. Short would say, "Now you have the Long and the Short of it." In my teens, when someone asked for my last name I'd say, "Well, it's Long, I'd better spell it out for you." And as an adult, my last name gives me a sense of identity and grounding. But as I get older, the word "long" has become much more than my name. Now when I hear the word, I am less likely to consider the adjective or my name, but rather I think about the verb: to long—to desire, to crave, to ache, to hunger.

Longing. The word conjures up the image of my grandmother as a young woman sitting at a small wooden desk in her apartment in Findlay, Ohio, writing to my grandpa—writing him a letter every day for three years—while he served in the Pacific during World War II. Longing. The word conjures up images of my brother and sister-in-law who waited for three years as they waded through the paper work and red tape of international adoption, each week checking with the agency's website to find out how much longer they would have to wait for their beloved daughter to come into their lives. Longing. The word conjures up the images of many of your faces—faces I've seen as you were longing—longing for the news of a diagnosis, longing for someone new to love, longing for a sense of peace, longing for the days gone by when you could look upon the face of the one you love. Longing.

A sense of longing develops in the vacuum of a sense of belonging. We know this longing for belonging—that is why we have friends and why we spend time with our families and the longing for belonging is—in large part—why many of us come to church. These places and people with whom we belong give our lives meaning and purpose.

We know what happens when someone feels as if he or she doesn't belong—when there is only longing and not belonging. The unmet longing for belonging is what makes gangs thrive and bullied kids snap. The unmet longing for belonging leads to alcohol and drug abuse as people try to substitute substances for real substance in their lives. The longing for love and acceptance, fellowship and friends is seen among people of all ages, cultures, and economic classes. Indeed, when I was speaking with one of you about the theme of this sermon earlier in the week you said, "I think a sense of belonging is our greatest need in life." It seems we just aren't meant to go it alone—we long for each other and just as God fervently longs for us, so too do we fervently long for God.

The resurrection matters, the resurrection matters to those longing for belonging because it is a threshold—a gateway—from this earthly world of longing to God's world of belonging. Because of the resurrection—we

belong to the kingdom of God. Because of the resurrection—we are brothers and sisters in Christ—we belong to each other. And because of the resurrection there is this—the church—to which we belong.

We belong here—within this sheep’s gate. We heard the shepherd calling, he opened up the gate, and now we have found this place—both physical and spiritual—to which we belong. The essence of Christianity is belonging—not just to a church but also and more importantly—belonging to God.

In his book *Life Together*, theologian and Nazi-resister Dietrich Bonhoeffer eloquently describes the beauty and fulfillment of belonging.

It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God’s Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing. The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer . . .<sup>1</sup>

As most of you know, Corey and I moved up here to start a new church. When you start a new church, you don’t just start having worship services and hope that people start coming. When you start a church you get out into the community to meet people, to network, and to determine what kind of church you need to be starting. We were living here nearly a year before we began our first worship services. And ironically, it was during the very challenging months leading up to the time when we began to have worship services that we most needed to be worshipping God in a community of other Christians and without that community, I felt alone and bereft. And so it was that when I did pulpit supply the first Sunday of the interim period here at this church—before the thought of applying for this position even crossed my mind—it was after that first time in your pulpit that I said to Corey, as we left this building that morning, “Whoever gets called to this church will be one lucky minister.” In a matter of an hour, my longing for belonging began to be satiated in this community.

And so I know, from first hand experience, the blessing of belonging that exists in this place. And I also know, from first hand experience, as do many of you, what it is like to long for the kind of belonging that exists in this place. And it’s not just being part of the community—it’s also the reminders we get during worship that not only do we belong to this family, we also belong to God. I know that without you and without those reminders, I was more anxious and less faithful. I knew the shepherd’s voice was calling me, it just took me a long time to find the gate to the pen. And now that I’ve entered through the gate, there is much more joy in my life.

And I believe that there are many people in our neighborhoods and communities who are also hearing the shepherd calling but are having a hard time finding the gate to enter into this community of belonging. They know there’s something more out there for them—they just don’t know where to find it. And I am convinced that many of them will find it here—just as we have.

There are youth who belong in our Sunday School and singers who belong in our choir and singles who belong in our Scooby Groups and retirees who belong in our pews and young parents who belong at our coffee hours and questioning believers who belong in our Adult Ed classes and sick folks who belong in our prayers and babies who belong in our nursery—there are folks of all ages, abilities, orientations, and economic backgrounds who belong here, who need to be here and who we need to have among us. But, they haven’t found the opening in the sheep’s pen—they haven’t been led to the gate. And a pretty sign at the village limits or a number listed in the yellow pages isn’t going to do it—they might help—but 80% of the new people who come to worship here will

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, 8-9.

come because one of you invited them—80% of people visit a church for the first time come because someone personally invited them.

I am convinced that Jesus the shepherd is calling folks into a Christian community and it is our job to invite them to this one. But they're not just going to appear. Jesus said, "I will make you fishers of all people." He didn't say they were going to leap into the boat. It may sound crass but we need to bait and hook them, entice and intrigue them. We're up against stiff competition from Sunday morning youth soccer leagues and over-extended parents and jazz brunch specials and the New York Times crossword puzzle and tee times and the general suspicion of organized religion that continues to grow among the population. And this is to say nothing of the competition from the Church of St. Serta—those warm, snuggly, comforting beds many folks who run the rat race of life from Monday through Saturday would rather just stay home and curl up in when Sunday comes around. And yet all of those things—from peewee soccer games to the finest pillow-top mattress are of this world—they do not meet the true longing for belonging, they do not help us to answer the call of the shepherd.

God has given us two precious gifts—the gift of belonging to God because the resurrection matters and because it does, we do too. And, the gift of this church—these people—this fellowship. We've freely received this gift and now it is our honor and responsibility to freely give it to others. May they hear the shepherd calling, and may we invite them to enter through the gate into this place of belonging.