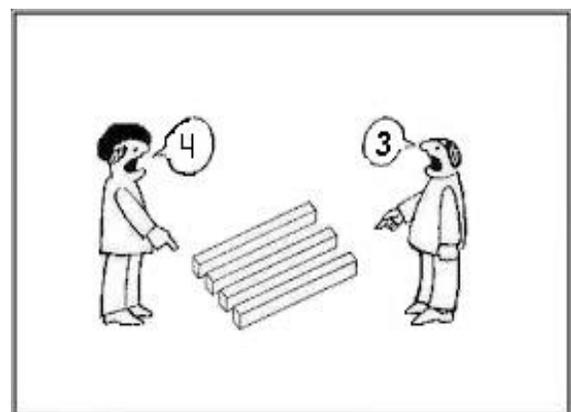


We don't often think about flocking with a group of people. I think sometimes we think maybe we'll go hang out with some folks. That idea of hanging out is one that we sometimes think about, spending time with a group. When we say we're going to hang out, it's not a date. We might just get a cup of coffee and catch up. Sometimes we've extended that a little bit to include the idea of who do we hang with? What group do we spend time with? As I began to think about the nature of spending time with people and as we tell each other stories, I think about how that can begin to shape how we see the world.

There was a story on the radio this week about some folks in Rwanda who were trying to figure out how to continue to bring healing to their country after the genocide of seven or eight years ago. They decided they were going to do a radio show, a soap opera about people from different sides—the Hutu and Tutsi—getting together. It was about a young couple that fell in love. One was Hutu and one was Tutsi. They were trying to see how that would change things. So they had somebody do a scientific study of it to see if it had changed people's perspectives. People said, “No, it hasn't changed our perspective.” But, when they asked, “Is it OK for your sons and daughters to marry across lines,” they said, “Yes, it is.” This wouldn't have been the case before. They may not have overtly said, “Yes, I can see how it has changed my perspective,” but when they started talking about acceptable social norms, it had changed what their social norms were.

I wonder if it's not a little that way with us—that who we spend our time with, what stories we spend our time with help us with our perspective. If we spend the time with a bunch of folks who say that we're looking at a cliff and things are dark and terrible, maybe we pick up some of that. If we spend time with people who look at it the other way and see that there's a possibility of an expanse out there, and some beauty we can look at, maybe that has some influence over who we are.

We do have a tendency to see things differently. Oftentimes we think it's about our perspective, but perhaps it's a combination. This is an optical illusion. If you are on one side it looks like there are four pieces and if you are on the other side, it looks like there are three. People are really seeing different things because of the nature of that optical illusion. Sometimes I think we see different things because we have different perspectives. We are focusing on a different part and we see things differently.



How we see things, then, is in part where we're at and who we're with, so it does form some ideas of who we should be. There's a *Peanuts* comic where Linus is patting a bird. His sister finds out that he's patting a bird and she comes out and excitedly yells at him because normal people don't pat birds. Then Snoopy comes walking up and so Linus asks her if he can pat a dog. She said, "Yes, normal people pat dogs. That is fully acceptable." It's suggesting there are some things we think are normal and some things we think aren't. We have social norms.

Why are those social norms so powerful? I think it's something about the way we are created. I think we need to have a sense of validation—that we fit, that we're cared for, that we're loved. We need that, and we're going to get it somewhere. One of the ways we do it is to try to fit in with our social group. That's why we have social norms. They help us know if we're OK. They give us a sense of validation.

So my question is really about where do we go. Where is our place where we hang out and begin to learn what those social norms are? One of those places I think, as we grow up, is our family. They begin to shape our sense of who we are.

What is our flock? What is the flock we are part of that helps us understand where and who we should be? I think we need those people in our lives who care for us. The question in my mind is whether Jesus is one who enables me to feel validated. Is it his care that begins to shape the way I understand the world? Or am I looking for it somewhere else?

Oftentimes when we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we have this nice pastoral scene in mind. I think there's a sense that at least I get to eat good grass. Sometimes it feels like that's about the end of it. So often it feels like the image of Jesus is supposed to be peaceful and calm, but sometimes it just ends up looking somber to me, or a little out of this world, unreal. Sometimes I wonder if we might think about, especially in the resurrection, what it's like to have a Good Shepherd that really wants to embrace us with joy and invite us to hang out with him, to be part of his flock and allow that to begin to shape us, to recognize that we have a God who has come to us to show us grace, to invite us to know the love God gives us, to show us that in God's eyes we are valuable human beings, unique, and through his love, validated in a way that I don't think I can find anywhere else. And yet it is so clear to me how much of my life I've spent working to be validated by others.

I think about growing up, wanting my parents to appreciate who I am. My mother was not one for giving a lot of praise. Sometimes I recognized that she appreciated who I was when she told other people how much she appreciated me for something I had done. That affects how you live your life. It's amazing to me that here I am in my late fifties, and I still find myself doing things that are influenced by the way my family did them when I was a boy. Phrases come out of my mouth that were my mother's phrases.

Our scripture today invites us to recognize that we have these folds, these places where we've learned our way of life, and that we're invited into the fold of Jesus to hang out with Jesus, to begin to allow him to shape how we see the world and who we are.

In Acts, when they talked to Peter about how he healed the lame man, he said it was through the power of Jesus. It was because of him. How do we let that work out in our lives? How do we let it come out in truth and action, as it says in scripture? A lot of what comes out of us is simply a reaction to what we think our social norms are, how we've been validated. How do we let that begin to be Jesus and being part of his fold, understanding that he is the Good Shepherd and that the care we need and the guidance we need to live into life comes through him?

So one of the things I invite you to do this week is notice those things that might come out of you that might cause you to say, "Wow! Where did that come from?" You might know exactly where it came from—your dad, your mother, your grade school growing up. And then ask, "Is that the same thing I would expect if I were abiding with Jesus, if I were in Jesus' flock?" Begin to think a little bit about what norms you are living by. Is it the norms of some social group that you hang out with? Sometimes those norms and the norms Jesus gives us are the same, and that's wonderful. But too often in my own life I have found that they are not. I'm still trying to adjust and understand why I default to a set of norms I don't want to use.

Jesus offers us this opportunity to listen. I think it's only as we recognize the fullness and the greatness of God's love for us—that we are forgiven, that we really are valued by God, and that our validation really comes through God's grace—that I can begin to change in my own life. I begin to recognize that that's what I want to depend on— not the approval of somebody else, but the approval God gives me, the grace God has shown me. Then maybe it can really come out in my life in real ways and in real actions. Amen.