

# Joy part 3

## John 10:1-10



The Uniting Church was officially created on June 22, 1977, over 40 years ago but I'm not exactly sure how I feel about that. You see I don't really believe in denominations, I don't think they were what Christ had in mind when he taught about one unified Kingdom of God. I think Denominations exist because the church has not been true to Christ and the body has splintered as a result of our own sin. To add a second wrinkle to that blanket, I did not choose the Uniting Church to be my church. There are other denominations that were much more attractive to me personally, but the Uniting Church was where God called me to serve and continues to call me to serve and in recent years God has persuaded me to stop winging about it and accept that the Uniting Church is my tribe and that God has a plan to redeem this particularly family of churches.

As much as my denomination can drive me a little nuts, the vision in the centre of the church union still inspires me. The following is the opening paragraph from the Uniting Churches basis of Union

### **The way into union**

*The Congregational Union of Australia, the Methodist Church of Australasia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia, in fellowship with the whole Church Catholic, and seeking to bear witness to that unity which is both Christ's gift and will for the Church, hereby enter into union under the name of the Uniting Church in Australia. They pray that this act may be to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. They give praise for God's gifts of grace to each of them in years past; they acknowledge that none of them has responded to God's love with a full obedience; they look for a continuing renewal in which God will use their common worship, witness and service to set forth the word of salvation for all people.*

*To this end they declare their readiness to go forward together in sole loyalty to Christ the living Head of the Church; they remain open to constant reform under his Word; and they seek a wider unity in the power of the Holy Spirit. In this union these Churches commit their members to acknowledge one another in love and joy as believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, to hear anew the commission of the Risen Lord to make disciples of all nations, and daily to seek to obey his will. In entering into this union the Churches concerned are mindful that the Church of God is committed to serve the world for which Christ died, and that it awaits with hope the day of the Lord Jesus Christ on which it will be clear that the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of the Christ, who shall reign for ever and ever.*

Let us pray for the Uniting Church

Now on with the Joy

**John 10:1-10 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> *"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.*

<sup>2</sup> *The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.*

<sup>3</sup> *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.*

<sup>4</sup> *When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.*

<sup>5</sup> *But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."*

<sup>6</sup> *Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.*

<sup>7</sup> *Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep.*

<sup>8</sup> *All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them.*

<sup>9</sup> *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture.*

<sup>10</sup> *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 have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10). One of the ways I think about Joy is being full of life and being full of life makes me think about children in that moment when they are fully engaged in play.*



Is there anything more Joyous? I know that when we became adults we were supposed to put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:11) but at the same time Jesus says that unless we come at life as little children we will miss out on important dimensions of the kingdom of God (Luke 18:17). There is a life dimension, there is a joy dimension that Jesus wants you to have but as the old saying goes you have to choose life.



John 10 is all about choices, do you choose the gate or do you jump the fence? Do you follow the shepherd or do you follow the robber? And if you do jump the fence and follow the robber, there are consequences for those choices, grumpy consequences, because the robber comes to steal, kill and destroy.

Let me illustrate this with a story I've told before, but the Lord's been framing it in a new way through this parable in John 10:1-10. It was 1978 and I was 18 sitting in an office in North Sydney having my very first real job interview with two very large gentleman in blue suits and ties. They were super friendly and it seemed to me that they liked the cut of my jib. Apparently my future in their company was so bright that I would have to wear shades. It was explained to me that Merit International was a major provider of educational programs designed to lift the average High School student into the top percentile. That if I joined their organisation, not only would I be earning top money for an entry level position, but I would be responsible for introducing families to a great product that I could be proud of. I liked what these guys were telling me and I signed up on the spot. I really thought I had met a couple of shepherds who would look after me – it turned out that they were robbers, real life robbers.

These guys were running a scam throughout NSW, collecting deposits for an expensive HSC primer program that only existed as a glossy brochure.

So when did I find out that my shepherds were robbers? Well I was pretty trusting in those days, you could say naïve, and you would be right. But gradually I began to realise that something was wrong. Those big smiles, that had promised so much at the interview, began to be replaced by different expressions that were far from friendly, especially when I returned without having made a sale. Then one day, we were in a caravan park, doing sales in a country town, when I suggested I'd had enough and I wanted to quit. One of them grabbed me by the arm and suggested we went for a walk. We came to an out of the way spot and I was pressed against a brick wall and they both got very close and very personal and it was made clear to me that any talk of leaving would lead to something - unpleasant. You see the *thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy*.

The irony of this time in my life was that the two men who I supposed were shepherds turned out to be robbers and a man who I thought might be a serial killer was in fact a shepherd. That part of the story happened when I prayed for help and on the day that I prayed for help I ended up in the house of a giant Dutchman who smiled at me in a way that made me think of ski masks and chain saws. But in reality this Dutchman, Frank, was a wonderful shepherd who took me into his house, taught me about faith and the real supernatural power and presence of God. Frank opened a door for me into to a life time of abundant life and Joy. So how do we tell the robbers from the shepherds? How do we make the right choices that lead to full Joyful life?



On the face of it, it doesn't seem to be a very hard choice. Why wouldn't you choose shepherds over robbers? However, what we often don't realise about this story is that the original audience could not see the difference. From their point of view both shepherds and robbers were creepy outsiders who lived in the wilderness, both looked ragged, poor and untrustworthy. If townsfolk came across someone with a sheep they couldn't tell if this was a sheep belonging to the shepherd or one that had been nicked by a robber. In the same way it is often hard for us to discern the right choices. Jesus said that we need to choose between a broad road that leads to destruction and a narrow gate that leads to life, but the choice isn't always easy or clear, because according to Jesus, few make the right choice (Matthew 7:13-14).



According to the bible, making right choices is about what we fill our heads with, because what we fill our heads with becomes the filter through which we make our choices. When I was that 18 year old signing up to work for robbers my head was filled with money and having a good time. That was my filter, so it doesn't surprise me that I completely lacked any kind of discernment. In John 10, Jesus is saying fill your head with me, with my word, with my presence. Then you will be sheep who knows where the good pasture is and what the good choices are. This is Solomon's take on this:

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6)*

Paul is saying something very similar in Romans 12:2

*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)*



Which is to say, fill your mind with Christ, because then we have the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) which provides the filter through which we can understand God's will, through which we can discern our choices. If we do not actively fill our minds with Christ then the world will by default dump all kinds of things into our head, which will give us the wrong filters and make us vulnerable to the wrong choices.



When we think about poor choices we can sometimes make the mistake of concentrating on those big cataclysmic choices that obviously wreck people's lives. But it's not just choosing drugs or gambling that can rob you of joy, though that will do it, as we have noted, sometimes it's the little things like the way we think about ourselves that can limit our access to our full spiritual heritage.



Jesus illustrates this by telling a story about a Pharisee who “*stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.'*” (Luke 18:11). The point that Jesus is making is that the Pharisee thought he was having a great spiritual life when in reality he was not. The Pharisees thought they were raising people up when in reality they were pulling people down. Jesus knew that despite all their spiritual carrying on, inside the Pharisees there was no real spiritual life. He called them *whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones...* (Matthew 23:27).



The apostle Paul, who was the ultimate Pharisee, admitted that he really didn't know about true spiritual life until he met the good shepherd. That all he thought he knew was just rubbish compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:8). When Paul met the shepherd and began to listen to the shepherd's voice, Paul began to grow in discernment, he began to realise that the religious rules about eating and drinking that he thought brought him closer to God were nothing compared to the righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17) that flowed from listening to the voice of the shepherd.

It is for this reason that the very first thing that Jesus preaches is



*"The time has come...The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15)*

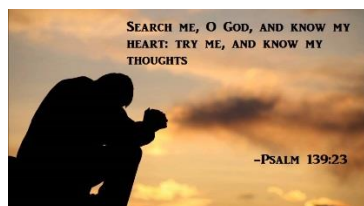
Repenting means to check and change the way we think, because the way we think is the filter through which we make our choices and live our life. God has good gifts for you (Luke 11:13) but the way you think is either going to open the door to those gifts or close them. Do we think about ourselves in the way the shepherd thinks about us, or is our mind full of other thoughts from the world?



Do we fill our mind with condemnation about our value, about our loveliness, about our lovingness, about our bodies, about our intelligence, about our capacities about our capabilities, about our future? You let those thoughts run loose in your mind and they will rob you blind of all your peace and all your joy.



Repent and believe the good news because the good news is that you are not in this on your own. Yes, your mind is a complex and powerful thing but you have a complex and powerful God, who knows your thoughts (Psalm 13:1, 2) and wants to transform them and fill us with joy, so we can pray:



*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*  
(Psalms 139:23-24)

Check me O Lord, check my thinking, and when I need to, change me O Lord change my thinking. Listen to these words of the Holy Spirit, *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, (Romans 8:1). When the word of God, communicating God's great love for us, begins to fill our thinking, then it breaks the chains of wrong-thinking and releases us into our inheritance of Joy.

Let's pray