

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday April 26th 2026 – (Year A. Easter 4)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Bayswater Uniting Church

Bible passages: Psalm 23; John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47 (NRSVUE)

“Living in communion”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

The title I've chosen for today's theme is "Living in Communion". The three bible passages we will look at later, each in their own way portray an idea of *communion*. Communion with God and communion with each other. In church we might most often use the word, 'communion' to refer to the 'sacrament' of communion that is regularly a part of our worship. But the dictionary offers two other meanings of communion: "An intimate fellowship" or "A body of Christians having a common faith and discipline". It's these other two ideas I'd like to explore today. In two of the readings this communion is depicted as being like a gathering – or a *flock*, of sheep under the guidance of a shepherd – where the Lord is the Good Shepherd. So, what are the true characteristics of this flock, as it applies to us as followers of the Shepherd? What does it really mean to live in communion with our Shepherd and with other sheep in the flock? And what about those sheep that we might think of as being 'outside' the flock?

MESSAGE

I have a 'Dad Joke' for you. Two blokes are on a train, traveling through the countryside. One is looking out the window. The other is reading a book. The bloke looking out the window sees some cows in a paddock. He elbows his mate saying, "Flock of cows!". Without looking up from his book the other block says, "*Herd* of cows. *Herd* of cows". The first bloke says, "Of course I've heard of cows! There's a flock of them over there!"

Sorry about that! 'Herd', 'flock' – the name all depends on the group of animals. Let's do a bit of a quiz. What do you call a group of fish? (school). A group of dogs? (pack). A group of bees? (swarm). A group of ants? (colony). Okay let's try some harder ones. A group of whales? (pod). A group of hyenas? (cackle). Finally, a group of owls? (parliament...since owls a wise, just like those in parliament?!)

Enough of the fun. More seriously, what do you call a group of *Christians*? [allow for answers]

Among the many things we might call ourselves, one of them is 'flock'. We are a flock, of sorts. What then does a flock of Christians look like?

[show pic of flock of birds in flight]. We often see a flock of birds together in flight. Sometimes they make a shape in the air, like a formation. It could be 'V' shape or other shape – to the point where we see the *overall* shape of the flock more than the *individual* shape of each bird. If this is a metaphor of the church, then what is our collective 'shape' as God's community. Or...what *should* be our 'shape'? How would you describe the church to someone?

As I mentioned earlier (above in preamble), when we look at our three bible readings, we have three images of the church. Two of them involve sheep representing people. The other one is just people gathering in a home. The idea that stood out for me in reading these three well-known passages together was 'communion'. Communion with God and communion with each other.

My question then, is this: What are the characteristics of *living* in this kind of communion, that we see in these passages?

1 – **Led by the Shepherd** [show slide]

Living in this communion we call ‘the church’ means we are led by our Shepherd. Psalm 23 paints a beautiful picture of what it means to be guided through life by the Lord as our Shepherd. Similarly in John 10, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who guides the flock to good pasture and to safe places. This feature of the church should be at the top of the list I feel. The Lord is our Shepherd. That alone goes a long way to describe the church.

2 – **A common purpose** [show slide]

When we look at those early Christians, gathering together, as in our Acts 2 passage, it was clear they had a common purpose, and that was to follow the way the Shepherd leads them. In their case Jesus had shown the apostles that way, and the apostles were now teaching that way to new believers. This ‘way’ became their common purpose, and the way of Jesus is our common purpose today.

3 – **Unity** [show slide]

Leading on from a common purpose is the closely related idea of unity. Living in communion means living in unity. In the Acts reading the word ‘fellowship’ is used. The Greek word is ‘koinonia’, meaning deep, intimate sharing. It’s derived from the word meaning ‘common’. They were closely bonded – connected together as one, just as we in the church today need to be.

The place where we most often see an expression of unity in the New Testament is around the meal table. They met together and ‘broke bread’ as it says in Acts (v42). This is one of the reasons our communion sacrament is such a strong symbolic demonstration of unity.

4 – **Inclusive not exclusive** [show slide]

All three passage speak of inclusivity. The Lord as Shepherd invites all into the flock. The early Christians were certainly incredibly united, but they didn’t remain in small cliques. We’re told that people were being “added to their number daily” (v47). They kept welcoming the newcomers, the outsiders, whoever they were. They didn’t exist just for themselves. Neither do we exist just for ourselves in the church today.

5 – **Supports the weak** [show slide]

I’m sure you’ve seen times when a runner in a race collapses, and a fellow competitor forgoes the chance to win and stops to help the stricken athlete. It’s a powerful image. This is a picture of the church living in communion. We help the weak, the oppressed, the left out, the damaged. In Psalm 23 the Shepherd *restores* those needing help. In John 10 the Shepherd *protects* the vulnerable. This Shepherd will also go out in search of that one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7). In Acts 2 the wealthy sold possessions to give to the needy among them. All ways to support the weak in their midst.

This of course is counter cultural in today’s world. We live in a society that is all about the powerful person rising to the top and dominating. Exploitation and oppression of people are the norm. We are called, instead, to be different, and always stand alongside the hurting in any way we can. That is true living in communion.

6 – **Both singular and plural** [show slide]

The word 'sheep' is an interesting word. It's unusual because the singular and plural forms are spelt the same. We don't say "a group of sheeps". It's just 'sheep', either way! What a coincidence, when Jesus likens the church to sheep. Living in true communion means individuals (singular) and community (plural) are completely inseparable.

In God's community the individual sees themselves always as part of community; and the community always sees the value of each individual. Paul's description of the church as the 'body of Christ' (cf Romans 12:3f) teaches how each individual part needs the whole, and the whole needs each individual part. So, we today must see the vital importance of both!

When we say we "belong to the church", in one sense we are stating that we are happy for the church to 'own me' – because we 'belong to the wider group'. This is counter-cultural too, since most people would say, "No one is going to own me. I am my own person!" Yet we are, in a spiritual sense 'adopted' into a family, a collective. Yes, we are each individual and unique, but we *belong* to each other. That's quite a radical thought.

7 – **Where true life is found** [show slide]

Finally, living in communion is living the true life. As Jesus said in our John passage, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly". (v10). The Psalmist echoes this, "my cup overflows". (v5). Living in communion means that this life is discovered and experienced *together!*

Conclusion

So I come back to my earlier question: What is our true *shape* as this flock of people gathering as the church?

[show slide of flock of birds in heart shape]. Imagine if that huge flock of birds in the sky formed the shape of a heart. It wouldn't happen in real life of course. [this is an AI generated image!]. But perhaps this sums up the shape of the church. Love. Living in communion with God and with each other means a lot of things, as we explored today, but above all it means love. As Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35) They will know we are Christians by our love.