The Gospel of John
Lesson 14 – John 10
Jesus the Way

An extended riff on Jesus as shepherd and sheep gate (vs. 1-18): Jesus in explaining who he is and how he differs from other religious authorities uses shepherd, sheep, robbers, and the sheep gate as an extended metaphor. This language would have been familiar and easily understood by his audience since sheep, shepherds, and robbers were ubiquitous in the first century.

To understand these images we need to know that at night sheep are often kept in pens constructed of thorny bushes in order to keep predators (both animal and human) away from the vulnerable sheep. Though there may be a gate made of these thorns, often the shepherd lays across the opening as a human gate. Jesus ties these images/metaphors together in an interesting and perhaps confusing way. It is interesting/confusing because Jesus might be playing all the parts (shepherd, gatekeeper, and gate) at the same time. Or it may be that God is the gatekeeper and opens the gate for Jesus, the true shepherd. Or it may be that Jesus is the gatekeeper who opens the gate so that God, as shepherd, can call his sheep. Regardless there are several things we learn about Jesus and other religious leaders.

First, other religious leaders are robbers and thieves who try to steal God's people (a view possibly shared by the Qumran community who considered all other Jewish leaders illegitimate). These include Temple leadership, Pharisees, scribes, and rabbis. Remember that Judaism was always trying to get Jewish Christians to leave the church and return to Jewish faith practices.

Second, God has opened the gate for Jesus and those whom God has given to Jesus (the sheep) know his voice. The shepherd knows all these sheep by name (not uncommon among shepherds) and will lead them (much like Psalm 23). These sheep will never follow a stranger (meaning Jewish leadership).

Third, salvation and eternal life only come through Jesus who is the gate. In some ways this could be seen as a counterpoint to the gates leading into Jerusalem and the Temple; the gates through which Jews would go to offer sacrifices and be in God's presence. At the time of the writing of John I would offer that this image of Jesus as gate is a counterpoint to Torah as the gate to God. This is akin to the Apostle Paul stating that Law does not save. Only Jesus saves.

Fourth, Jesus is the good shepherd who will give his life for his sheep. The good shepherd is seen as being different from other religious leaders in that they will run away from danger…Except that Jewish leaders regularly died for their faith…but their deaths could not save.

Fifth, there are "other sheep" to whom the shepherd will go. Since much of the church was Gentile by the time of John's writing, the assumption is that these are the other sheep.

Sixth, we learn that Jesus' death is chosen by him. Jesus is not forced to die. Yet he does so because he is obedient to the Father. This image also includes the resurrection in that Jesus will take up his life again.

We see who are and are not part of Jesus' flock (vs.19-42): The end of the chapter is a reminder that the Pharisees are not part of the sheep God has given to Jesus the shepherd because they hear Jesus' voice and see Jesus' works (works of the father like giving sight to the man born blind) but don't follow. Even so, when Jesus crosses back over the Jordan, there are those who are his sheep and so they hear, and follow.

Questions:
1. Which image of Jesus in this passage most resonates with you?
2. How do you deal with the concept in John that all other religious leaders are robbers leading people to death.
3. What does it mean to you that Jesus knows you by name?