

Rector's Sermon: 3 May 2020

John 10:1-10

Here we are in the season of Easter, and yet it feels like one long Lenten discipline of social distancing and fighting illness. Even as we celebrate the truth of Easter resurrection, Good Friday's shadow still looms large. That should not surprise us but rather draw us to a greater empathy of those of our world who daily live with the shadow of Good Friday very present in their lives. We know that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is faithful. So, let's together have a closer look at our Gospel reading today

It is interesting to note that of all the Good Shepherd Sunday texts in the lectionary, this gospel is by far the most abstract. The Gospel writer clearly has something to communicate to us, but his layers of symbolism are at times so impenetrable that it becomes difficult at times to understand what he means beyond the obvious. In fact, John even tells us outright that this one is going to take some drilling down: "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

Tragically this text has a history of being used to exclude. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit." Christians have used this passage to enforce false boundaries to shore up their own power, labeling as the proverbial "thieves and bandits" anyone who is "unorthodox," or 'not saved' which has negatively impacted on theologies of gender, race, disability and sexuality to a terrible shameful cost. "Not everyone is going to get saved," is the message the powerful have taken of this text. "Jesus doesn't love everyone," is the concealed – but far more honest – attitude underlying the pious concern for being "correct."

The reality is that the more we are driven into anger and fear, the harder it is to see any shades of subtlety. When we feel threatened, we sink into binary thinking very quickly. All shades of gray are rendered invisible by our primal drive for security. Everything becomes very stiff and unyielding, and suddenly we love Jesus' image of the sheepfold with the gate that is going to keep some people out because, by implication, it will keep those of us "on the inside" safe. We desire a holy and secure isolation from "those people," who will no longer be a threat. In this circle-the-wagons mentality, everything and everyone becomes rigidly locked into place. We imprison ourselves and everyone around us into binary roles of good and bad and this becomes a place devoid of liberation, grace and resurrection.

The issue is that when we first read this Gospel, especially if we are feeling vulnerable, threatened and longing for security, all we see are walls, barriers, boundaries, and separation. But I wish to share that that is not what Jesus is talking about when he says, "I am the gate." Jesus is not trying to

keep people out, or even allow “us” to stay safely in. Nor is he trying to make us feel like we’re not good enough to be let in, to join the insiders inside the sheepfold.

For what actually is the purpose of a gate? Its function is precisely to allow travel through the wall. It is a means of liberation, not a means of exclusion. When Jesus says, “I am the gate,” it is his way of inviting us both in and out. He is telling us that he is our way to safety, our way to entering a restful place where we know we are loved and protected. But Jesus is also informing us that we will need to go back out through that gate and into the world. It is his invitation to leave safety and security and go back out into a world of challenges and stumbling blocks.

We may be drawn to the promise of sanctuary, but balk that Jesus also expects us to go leave the place of comfort and live out his risen life in the real world in ways that will often involve sacrifice and suffering.

If that is not enough, Jesus really gets rebellious is when he calls himself the gate. He’s not just saying, “There is a gate in all your carefully constructed, self-isolating walls.” He’s saying, “I am the gate in all your carefully constructed, self-isolating walls.” It’s this stealthy undermining means of salvation that is so downright extraordinary.

Thus, our Gospel reading today confirms that everything we have set up to protect ourselves is actually our very means of being called out into a life of adventure, possibility, and yes, sacrifice and suffering. And those careful walls we’ve placed between ourselves and others? Jesus is the gate. He’s made himself a secret entrance into our hardened hearts, and all kinds of scary people are going to get in. When we fully understand that Jesus is the gate - Jesus is the entry point into all change, depth, struggle, and love - it’s both simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating. As the saying goes, “God loves us exactly as we are, and God loves us far too much to leave us that way.”

The theologian and author Martin Laird tells a story of walking across a moor with a friend who had four dogs. As they walked, three of the dogs would run out across the moor, leaping over creeks and chasing rabbits and joyfully exploring their environment. But one of the dogs would only run in a small circle right in front of his owner. No matter how many miles they walked or how far afield the other dogs went, this dog would only run in a tight circle very close to them. Laird asked him why, and he replied, “This dog was kept for his entire life prior to coming to me in a very small cage. His body has left the cage, but his mind still carries it with him. For him, the world outside the cage does not exist, and so no matter how big and beautiful the moor, he will never run out across it. I bring him here so he can breathe the fresh air, but he’s still running circles in his cage.”

On a good day, when we’re feeling confident and secure in God’s love, when life is simple and God’s people and God’s creation are things of wonder, we embrace the gray. We can set aside the comforting security of binary thinking and dive into the hinterland between. Gray is possibility, opportunity, the treasure hidden in the field. We can engage with the tension. We can handle and

even appreciate nuance, subtlety, ambiguity, and the very uncertainty that is the foundational characteristic of faith and therefore of all life. But when we are hurting; when we are weary, afraid and anxious, not only do we struggle to see the shades of gray, we no longer want to. We become the very dog who carries the cage with him out onto the moor. We think we're keeping ourselves safe, we think we're obeying the rules, but really, we've become our own jailers. We refuse to see the open gate in our hearts. We refuse to see Jesus.

Thank God then that Jesus is patient with us. Jesus says to us all, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." Sometimes we wish there were no gate and no pasture. Sometimes we wish the barriers and boundaries we've placed around our hearts were bulletproof and siege resistant. But God though has a habit of reminding us that that aching hole in our hearts, where insight and possibility resides and where all those difficult, challenging, beautiful, flawed people, keep sneaking in—that aching hole in our hearts is the very presence of Jesus, the very gate which invites us to rest in green pastures, and lie beside the still waters. Amen.

Tim