

The UMC of Berea
Acts 2.42-47; Psalm 23; John 10.1-10
4th Sunday of Easter

We are now three full weeks into this Easter season, and yet, in many ways, our lives still feel like one long Lenten discipline of social distancing and trying to avoid illness. Even as we continue proclaiming and sharing and resting upon the promise of Easter Sunday, Good Friday's shadows still loom long. And yet, we trust that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is ever faithful—ever present, ever working to heal and to make whole in this world—and so, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, we are guided by two of our scripture readings—Psalm 23, which we sang, and John 10, which we read—to focus our attention there: on these images of God as shepherd.

As we do so, one of the things we might notice is that our Gospel lesson—John 10—is a rather abstract reading and includes more than this image of God *as shepherd*. Jesus begins by saying that he is a shepherd but then shifts to identifying himself as “the gate,” and while he obviously has something he wants to communicate here through these multiple metaphors, his layers are so dense and overlapping that it can be difficult to understand what he means. The writer of the Gospel even acknowledges this, telling us that “those who heard Jesus...didn't understand what he was saying.” Jesus' lesson here goes deeper than the surface level.

At the surface level, traditionally this text often has been used as a means—wielded as a weapon—of exclusion. Jesus says,

I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw.

And unfortunately, over the years, we have misused and abused that statement to enforce all sorts of false boundaries, shoring up our own privilege and power, labeling as the proverbial “thieves and outlaws” anyone who seems to us “unorthodox,” whether that means having the “wrong” gender or sexuality, ethnicity, doctrine, education, politics, or whatever else. *Not everyone is going to “get saved,”* is the message the privileged ones—those who are certain that they're correct—take from this text, with the subliminal message that, in fact, Jesus doesn't love *everyone* but only those who are some definition of “right.”

And of course, the further we are driven into fear, anxiety, or anger, the harder it is for us to live with any shades of subtlety or nuance about this. When we feel threatened, our survival instincts take over, and we sink into “black and white” thinking. All shades of gray are rendered imperceptible by our primal drive for “security” and being on the “right side.” Everything becomes very rigid, and suddenly we love Jesus' image of the sheep pen with a gate that's going to keep some folks out and—by implication—“us” safe inside.

In this “circle-the-wagons” mentality, everything and everyone becomes locked in place—including us. We imprison ourselves as well as everyone around us into roles of “good guys” and “bad guys,” “insiders” and “outsiders,” “right” and “wrong,” with very little freedom and very little love.

But of course, that cannot be right when it comes to Jesus' teaching, so let us dig a little deeper. When we first read these images—especially if we're feeling vulnerable, threatened, or otherwise longing for security—then all we might notice initially are the walls, barriers, boundaries, and separation. That is what a sheep pen is.

But notice: that is not where Jesus' focus is. He does not say to us, "I am the sheep pen," but instead, "I am the gate." And what is the purpose of a "gate"? It is to create an *opening* in a fence, isn't it? It is to allow travel *through* the wall. A gate is a means of liberation, not exclusion or separation. So, when Jesus says, "I am the gate," he's inviting us both in and out: not to stay where we are. He is telling us that he is our way to safety: to entering a restful place where we know that we are loved and well. And he is *also* telling us that we will need to go back out again, through the gate into the world.

Otherwise, there would not be a gate in the sheep pen—or, at least, Jesus would not emphasize that piece of it. There could be just a solid wall to keep us safe inside. Instead, Jesus emphasizes the "gate," and thereby invites us to leave our search for security and safety and to go back out into the neighborhood, living with a deep commitment to practicing our discipleship in world-transforming ways.

This morning, Jesus tells us that we are safe *and also* that there is more to life than safety. Jesus tells us that we have a promise of sanctuary *and also* an expectation to go back out to do the good work we are called to do, knowing that sometimes—quite frankly—that work is going to be really hard.

All that, of course, is "typical" Jesus. His teachings always include both comfort and great challenge. But here is the really subversive bit of these images: by calling *himself* the gate, he is not just saying, "There is a gate in your carefully-constructed, self-isolating walls." Even more, he's saying, "*I am* the gate in your carefully-constructed, self-isolating walls."

And that means that everything we have tried to set up as a barrier is being broken open by the very presence of Jesus. Everything we have tried to set up to protect ourselves is being subverted by the very means of our salvation. All those careful walls we have placed between ourselves and others—not the necessary ones of social distancing, of course, but the much more pernicious ones we surround our hearts with all the time: the false narratives about ourselves and others, the stereotypes, the biases, whether conscious or subconscious—Jesus is the gate in these walls, the secret entrance into our hardened hearts.

And once the risen Christ gets in there, then just as he did with the tomb on Easter morning, our hearts are going to be broken open. And once our hearts are broken open, then our circles of care are going to expand, making room for all sorts of folks to get in. As Clarence Jordan once wrote of the significance of Easter, "The good news of the resurrection of Jesus is not that we shall die and go home to be with him, but that he has risen and comes home with us, bringing all his hungry, naked, thirsty, sick prisoner siblings with him."¹

"I am the gate," Jesus tells us. Not the wall. The gate: the entry point into all change and depth and struggle and love. That's simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating: a new, resurrected sort of life. "I came so that they could have life," Jesus says—"indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest."

Our first reading today—from Acts 2, just on the other side of Pentecost—describes for us what this "life lived to the fullest" will be. Being together and learning together, praying together and eating together, and acting together in tangible ways that demonstrate that the wealth we hold exists not to meet our own desires but to meet the needs of all. That is the sort of life that lasts—that outlasts all the principalities and powers, fears and anxieties that put Jesus on

¹ Clarence Jordan, *The Substance of Faith and Other Cotton Patch Sermons* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005).

the cross. That is the sort of life that outlasts all the injustices and inequities of our current economic and political systems, the vast chasms that separate us from those we are sent to love. That is the sort of life that lasts because it's God's life—in us and in the world—and God is still alive.

“I am the gate,” the risen Christ says to us. “Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture.” Truth be told, there are times we might wish there were no gate. When we are hurting or weary, anxious or afraid, we can become convinced that we are safer when we are keeping others out. But before long, God graciously reminds us: the aching hole in our hearts—where creativity and compassion and all these beautifully flawed fellow creatures keep sneaking in: that is the gate, the very presence of Jesus—the good shepherd—bringing us into green pastures, leading us beside still waters, pursuing us with goodness and mercy, forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.