

April 30th, 2023

John 10:1-11 “Through the Gate”

I have a list of things that I do and say that vex my family and friends to no end. Hard to believe, right? And I’ve got to confess that sometimes I do these things on purpose. Here’s an example: [GREEN BEAMS STORY] Here’s another example: Someone will ask me an either/or question that requires an either/or answer. But instead, I say, “Yes.” Or, “no.” For example, someone will say, “So, Jesse, are you a Star Trek fan or a Star Wars fan?” And I’ll say, “yes.” Now I *could* say, “That’s an interesting question because I find merit in both franchises and appreciate them equally.” But no ... I’ve got to make a Jesse Kearns dad-ism out of it because I think I’m funnier than I really am. Now Mary might argue that I’m just not capable of giving a straight answer to *any* question, but the jury is still out on that one.

That’s kind of what we’re dealing with here in our scripture this morning. Today is what some churches call, “Good Shepherd Sunday.” All of the readings in the lectionary today have something to do with understanding God as the image or embodiment of a shepherd. The call to worship this morning was the 23rd Psalm that begins with, “The Lord is my shepherd.” But the main event for us this morning is this passage from John that Kevin read. In this passage, we have a gate, a gate keeper, sheep, a reference to those who would enter the place where the sheep are kept (some are thieves and bandits), and finally a shepherd. Jesus makes some claims about himself in this passage too. He says he is the gate. He says he is the gate keeper. And he says he is the shepherd. I can image one of his disciples pausing to ask, “So wait a minute. What are you? The gate, the gate keeper or the shepherd?” Then Jesus would smile and say, “Yes.” See, if Jesus can do it, so can I!

There are also two declarations in this passage that preachers like to set aside and highlight. There’s verse nine, where Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.” The other is the second half of verse 10 where Jesus

says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Now, are you all ready for a preacher secret? Somebody said that I need to write all these preacher secrets down and publish them someday. I don’t know. Back in 1999, pro-wrestler Mick Foley came out and said that everything you see on professional wrestling is scripted, and he got in a lot of trouble with his fans and colleagues. Same goes for magicians who go on Youtube and show everyone the secrets of their trade. What I’m about to tell you already gets me in enough trouble with some preachers. I don’t need to publish anything. But in the same way that everyone already figured out that pro wrestling was fake before Mick Foley what I’m going to tell you isn’t going to be much of a surprise. Here is preacher secret number 46 – “You can get more people to support you and do your bidding by using fear than you can by invitation.” Or to put it more bluntly, the stick is a lot more effective than the carrot. People will respond to the fear of hell more than they will to the invitation to heaven. Now see? You already knew this. Just like you’ve always known that pro-wrestling is scripted, and magicians use distraction to make it look like they have supernatural powers. And yet ... the wheels on the church bus keep going around and around. Uh-oh. Where are you going this morning preacher?

This passage from John’s gospel is often presented in a way to communicate, “If you aren’t one of the sheep in this pasture, you will not receive this abundant life that Jesus is talking about.” Many preachers will tell folks that the abundant life Jesus is talking about here equals eternal reward. So, you better be one of the sheep that recognize the shepherd’s voice, or you won’t receive this eternal reward. In fact, you will receive the opposite of a reward, which is - punishment. You don’t want to be punished now do you? And if I were a less scrupulous pastor, I would capitalize on this fear of punishment. I could get you to show up to worship more often. I could get you to volunteer to do more things. I could get you to put more money in the offering plate. Who knows? I might be able to get you to come to South America with me to drink some Kool-Aid and I wouldn’t be the first Disciples pastor to do that either.

But if you read this whole section of John that starts back in John 9 and continues through chapter 10, you'll see that this is an invitation into a new way of life that leads to safety. Back in John 9 when Jesus healed a man who was blind from birth, the Pharisees were more interested in whether it was the blind man's fault for being blind or his parents' fault. And we covered that story back in March by the way, so this is just a continuation of Jesus' response to these Pharisees who were obsessed with what kind of sin this man or his parents must have committed for him to be born blind. The dominant story in human history is, "If you've lived a good life, good things will happen to you, but if you've lived a bad life, bad things will happen to you." It's a toxic system that says "other-ness" is what separates us from God. We still struggle with this system! What Jesus is saying in today's text is, "I'm creating a *new* system, and I'm the way to get you through it. And this way is a way of invitation. It's not a way of seeing every sin or malady to explain everything wrong in this world or seeing God's punishment in everything. I'm creating something new, and all you need to do is walk through the gate. Hear my voice. Hear what I'm teaching. Hear my word." How does John's gospel start out? "In the beginning was the word." Who is the word? Jesus. Jesus is the word made flesh. And here Jesus is saying, "If you recognize the word ... if you know it ... this word is the way to the abundant life that is available to you."

Unfortunately, this passage has been used to describe a gate that is there to keep people out. And furthermore, if you do not walk through this gate, you are banished. But that's not what's going on here. This is about inclusion, not exclusion. And this is where verse 10 comes in handy. Jesus says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." There *are* those in this life who come to kill, steal, and destroy. Jesus' purpose is for people to have life and have it abundantly, which can also be translated, "life to the fullest." How do we live life to the fullest? How do we live life abundantly? We follow Jesus as he has taught us to do. Now ... are there other ways where we can live life to the fullest? *Potentially* yes.

But Jesus is saying whoever enters *this* gate and follows me *will* have abundant life. That's the salvation he's talking about here.

But again we, like those Pharisees during Jesus' time, are more interested in exclusion than inclusion. Back to Jesus' claims and our response to them – Who are you? Are you the gate, the gate keeper or the shepherd? “Yes.” And the church responds like the disciples in verse six, “but they did not understand what he was saying to them.” So we jump in and say, “Tell you what Jesus. You be the shepherd and watch over the sheep. You do the Psalm 23 thing. Make them lie down in green pastures, lead them beside still waters. Restore their souls. Go get those little lambs that run astray. Feed them when they're hungry and whatnot. You be the shepherd, Jesus. *We'll* be the gate *and* the gate keepers! Let us be in charge of who is in and who is out! We would *love* to do that! Shoot, we've had so much practice that we're experts on the subject! C'mon Jesus. What do you say? I mean Paul says we're the 'Body of Christ,' right? We're here for you man!”

Okay, let's run with that for a bit. If the church is the Body of Christ, and we are, and we are to be the gate or the gate keeper, we have a choice. We can be the gatekeeper who acts like a bouncer, *or* we can be a gate and a gatekeeper who is dedicated to maintaining a safe place where *all* of the sheep are known and can flourish. We can create sanctuary where *all* can be cared for and nurtured. This space that we're in right here is called a sanctuary. When we hear that word, we think “place of worship where we have rituals that remind us of our dedication to God.” But you know where else we use that term? There's a strip of land on the East side of the Feather River that starts where the afterbay runs into the river and goes down a couple of miles south of Oroville that's set aside as a wildlife sanctuary. Now when we think of it in those terms we say, “Oh yeah, that's where the birds and all the other animals that thrive in a wetland area can be safe and secure. They're protected there.” But it's the same thing! One of the reasons we come to this place of worship ... this sanctuary is so that we can have a safe and

secure place where we can be transformed by God into the image of Christ!

So here's a question for the church. Not just our church, but all Christian churches. "What are we doing to offer life?" Jesus talks about the thieves and bandits who want to harm the sheep. There's plenty of those out there. They *steal* life. Jesus *offers* life. How are we offering life to others? Here's another question to consider. Which sheep are allowed in? All of them. We are all God's sheep. There's no distinction here in this parable about who are the good sheep and who are the bad sheep. The relationship between the sheep and the shepherd is assumed. The sheep recognize the shepherd's voice ... the word ... and will know love and grace and acceptance when they hear his voice. And the sheep have nothing more to do than be sheep. Now, as some have pointed out to me, being called a sheep is not exactly a positive thing. One of the most irritating labels that has come up in the last twenty years is, "Sheeple." It's used to describe people who are clueless. And let's face it, sheep are pretty clueless, and yet that's what we are being compared to on several occasions in the Bible. The bar is set pretty low to be a sheep. But here's what being a sheep requires: It means trying to follow the shepherd because sheep tend to get lost and the shepherd has to go find them. Well ... that sounds kind of like us. So, what does it mean to put our lives and our security in the hands of the Good Shepherd? It means letting go and allowing the Good Shepherd to shape us and mold us into the image of God's son. That's why we come to church. That's why we enter into this sanctuary where we are all safe to discover this.