

A Easter 4 5.3.20

John 10:1-10

Focus Statement: Jesus wants us to be safe and thrive

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, we read a section of John chapter 10, which is known as the Good Shepherd discourse. All the other readings also have some mention of sheep in them. Though it is really next year's Easter 4 reading, verses eleven to eighteen, that have Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In this morning's readings, Jesus says, "I am the gate." But as theologian Karoline Lewis pointed out, between "Gate Sunday" not having quite the same ring to it and our hymnal's decided lack of gate themed hymns, "Good Shepherd Sunday" it is.

I've been thinking all week about what it means to think of Jesus as the gate. Maybe it's human nature, but when I think of gates and gatekeeping, I think of things kept out. When we hear Jesus referred to as the gate, I think the verse we tend to read with this is John fourteen, six, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," and we make this gate exclusionary. Jesus is the way, and the only way, so you better believe in Jesus or you're out. Now, Jesus did say, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," but Jesus did not say that here. So let's set some context for this gate metaphor to see if we can shed some light on what Jesus was getting at.

We're reading the Gospel of John, and we've talked about how John uses a very particular pattern of event-dialogue-discourse. Event – Jesus does something, heals someone, reaches out to someone, meets someone, etc. Dialogue – a series of conversations ensue between Jesus and the person, onlookers, etc. Discourse – Jesus offers an extended monologue on

what the event and dialogue says about who Jesus is and what his mission is about. So what is the Good Shepherd discourse a discourse for? Think back a million years ago, to the fourth Sunday of Lent, when we read the story of the man born blind in John chapter nine. Jesus was walking along the road when he met a man who had been blind from birth and restored his sight. This miracle, the event, kicked off a series of conversations between the neighbors, the man and the Pharisees, the Pharisees and the man's parents, and the man and the Pharisees again, until finally the Pharisees drove the man out of the community.

So Jesus went and found the man, a move which only further annoyed the Pharisees. And Jesus remarked, this is chapter nine, verse thirty-nine, by the way, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see may see, but those who do see may become blind." To which the Pharisees responded, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" A telling question, because while the Pharisees were not physically blind in the same way the man born blind had been physically without sight, their lack of knowledge of who Jesus was indicates not blindness, but a refusal to see, in a metaphorical sense, who Jesus was. This was the jumping off point for our reading this morning, this teaching about how Jesus is the gate for the sheep.

I got to thinking about gates and the nature of gates, what they do and what they are for. And I thought about the work we recently had done at Trinity in having new door locks put on the front doors. The decision to have new locks put on the doors was a decision based on hospitality and being a more welcoming space for Woman's Co-op and our community.

Our old door locks, for those of you who aren't familiar with our building, were original to the building. So they had served us very well, but they had seen a lot of use in their fifty years of service and they weren't serving us well anymore. It had actually gotten to the point where one of them at first would not unlock, and we had to duct tape it open every Sunday. Then it wouldn't lock all the way, and to secure the building we had to wire the doors shut with a coat hanger. This was obviously both not welcoming and not safe. Not welcoming because I cannot tell you the number of times either on a Sunday morning or worse at a community event, someone would try to come in the wired shut doors, and I'd have to apologetically direct them around to the other set of doors and explain, we really did want them there, that door just didn't work right. And unsafe in a couple ways. First, if we'd had an emergency where people needed to get out of the building quickly, those doors wouldn't be available. But also, the coat hanger was only so effective as a locking mechanism. A really determined person could probably have still gotten in if they'd wanted to. And given the nature of the work Co-op does, there are times when, for the safety of its members, those doors need to be able to be locked and locked well. And that was a level of security I never felt like we were able to offer to the degree that we needed to.

So these new door locks say several things about who we are as a congregation. The fact that all four of them can now be fully unlocked and opened says this is a building where you are welcome. We want you to be able to come in here, to make use of this space, to have your needs met. And that they can be locked when they need to says to our Co-op sisters, we care about you. We want you to feel safe here, to know that we value you, and

your safety and security, and we want to be able to keep you safe if and when we need to. Our door locks aren't about keeping people out, they're about keeping people safe.

Friends, that's what Jesus means when he says "I am the gate." When Jesus says, "I am the gate," he is not playing the role of bouncer at some exclusive nightclub, deciding who is in and who is out of the Kingdom of God. That was what the Pharisees were doing when they kicked the man born blind who could not adequately, in their minds, answer their questions out of the community. When Jesus says, "I am the gate," what he's talking about is protection. It is the promise that what Jesus wants for his people, what it means to be in the Kingdom of God, is to be in a place of safety and security. People who want to sneak in over the fence are not people who are feeling left out or excluded, they are people who mean harm, people who are concerned not about the community but about their own wants and privileges.

This week, council met for the first time via Zoom, and much of the conversation was around what it will look like when the Stay Home. Stay Safe. order is lifted and we are all allowed to return to church. And I want to caution you right now friends, that it is going to look different for a while, probably a long while. Until there is a vaccine or an effective treatment, we really cannot safely gather in the way that we used to. I don't know when we will be able to come back to worship, even after the Stay Home. Stay Safe. order is lifted. Some level of social distancing will remain, and you will probably be stuck sitting in your living rooms listening to my poor singing over Facebook Live for a while. I say this not to disappoint you, but to try and not get your hopes up, this is going to be a long haul yet.

But when I get sad and discouraged about not being able to be in worship with you all, when I wonder if we're not doing our work as church by not gathering in prayer and praise, to be fed at the table and nurtured in fellowship, I remember the last day I was in the office in March. There were rumors that the governor was going to issue a Stay Home. Stay Safe. order, and I was packing up my computer in case I would not be able to return. The building was completely empty, Co-op had already made the decision to shutter their in-person operations and work from home, and I was feeling very torn on this decision to close the church building. After all, we are the church, and we are a church committed to our neighborhood, what does it mean to close our door to our neighbors in a time of crisis. As I picked up the printer off the desk, I noticed that one of the print outs from Eileen's Sunday school lesson from the week before had slid under it. The print out had three Lenten practices listed on it for the kids to decorate, "prayer, fasting, and acts of love."

What we are doing, dear people of God, are acts of love. We are not gathering out of love for our neighbors, we will be slow returning to worship out of love for our neighbors, and when we return, we will worship differently out of love for our neighbors. The gates we will put up for how we will gather, how close we will stand, how we will sing, and pray, and praise, all of these things we will do will not be about exclusion, they will be about inclusion. They will be about following the model of Jesus when he said, "I am the gate" and ensuring that we create a safe space where the people of God can come and feel honored and valued and secure. So hang in there, dear people of God, hang in there. This is tough, I know. But God holds you, God loves you, and these gates are what love looks like. Amen.