

Of Thieves & Bandits, Gates & Shepherds

John 10.1-10

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Easter 4A

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It's a funny thing to preach from the same text year after year and then suddenly look at it as though for the first time. I sat on the floor of my office last week, reading and rereading these ten verses, and I began to draw all of the parts. Maybe you want to do the same thing as we enter into the metaphors of John 10. (And it is metaphors and not metaphor. There are multiple images working here, and I suspect it's for the best today if we choose one or two to chase instead of all of them.)

First, I drew an unfinished circle for the sheepfold. Then, I drew a gate to complete the circle. Inside the circle I made a dozen or so marks and labeled them sheep. Beside the gate I made a little stickman gatekeeper and amused myself with a joke about the key master.¹

Then I made some little guys with bandanas across their faces just outside the circle with an arrow going over the side of what must be a wall or a fence. I labeled those guys "Thieves & Bandits."

Lastly, I drew a man with a wooden crook in his hand and a Christmas pageant fabric and bathrobe belt around his head. He, of course, is the shepherd. I drew an arrow connecting him to the gate as he makes his way toward the sheep who hear his voice as he leads them out.

The gospel writer gives us a little help in verse 6 that I think we may need as our guide, "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

And in an attempt to get their imaginations heading in the right direction, Jesus twice explains, "I am the gate—whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture—I have come that they [the sheep] may have life and have it abundantly."

¹ For those reading this manuscript, that's Ghostbusters and not John's gospel.

I stared at my little drawing of the scene Jesus described. And with that in one hand, I turned to Gerard Sloyan's commentary on John with the other. You know what's not helpful? When you open a commentary for some fresh, new perspective on a text only to have a scholar write, "we do not have the key to the allegory."² Maybe Sloyan's reminder is helpful, however, because the point of the story isn't to add codes to all of those individual parts on the diagram. The point of the story is answering some questions about our lives.

To do so, I think we first determine who "they" are in verse 6. Who is listening to Jesus but not understanding him? There are certainly plenty of scenes across the gospels of the disciples expressing such bewilderment. In this case, however, we have to look at the preceding story. Recall that the chapter and verse designations aren't actually part of the story. So where verse 1 begins, "Very truly, I tell you," we need to immediately look at the preceding words.

Chapter 9 is about a man born blind, and we explored this text six weeks ago. The disciples and Jesus come across this man and have a discussion of his sin. You see, he was born with a preexisting condition. And the culture around him assumed this man never would have had something wrong with him if he and his family had lived right. Jesus knows this way of thinking is both absurd and cruel. There is not a single healing story in any of the four gospels in which Jesus begins by asking, "Do you deserve this healing? Are you worthy of this treatment? Will you be able to pay me back for offering this service to you?" No, instead, Jesus challenges the ones who teach that kind of cruelty and the disciples who have been raised in a culture that teaches them to treat vulnerable and suffering people as outcasts.

He makes mud with spit and dirt, rubs them on the man's eyes, and instructs him to wash in the pool of Siloam. Before the man goes to wash his eyes, we know what will happen. He will see again. Now in John's gospel, this is part one to a three part arc. Part one is the action story—Jesus and the disciples encounter the man, discuss the situation, and heal him. Part two is the response story—the religious leaders are baffled and offended that such a healing could happen without their oversight, permission, witness, blessing, or participation. They repeatedly request the man born blind to explain the story to them, even demanding testimony from his parents. Thoroughly unsatisfied with what the man has to say about his healing encounter with Jesus, the religious leaders drive the man out of their presence. And to drive him out of their presence mean to drive him out of the faith community; to doubt the ways of God and

² Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 129

hold onto the stubborn definitions of sin and the absurd notion that there are limits to God's love.

And this driving out leads us to part three—the teaching of stories one and two. Jesus goes to the religious leaders because he hears they have driven out this man who can now see. He and the religious people are debating what has happened, and some of them ask each other, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” In his explanation, Jesus continues, “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.”

Not only are you blind. But you are thieves and bandits when you treat people like this. Instead of labeling the drawing of the parable and attempting to create a key for the metaphor, we need to ask the right questions of the text. This is not a parable about who is in the fold and who is not. We are not determining the goodness and worthiness of some sheep against the badness and unworthiness of others. We're all in that fold together. This is a metaphor about all of us together, a collective interest in the welfare of humanity. The life connected to the Jesus gate is expansive not exclusive.

A shepherd goes in the gate and knows the sheep. Thieves and bandits break into the fold and steal and destroy what they find. What is being given or being taken? The way of thieves and bandits is less life. The way of Jesus and the shepherd is more life. Jesus hasn't come to take away anything but to give overflowing, abundant life.

What does that mean? Well, to figure out what this means, we need to look for clues in the stories of people Jesus encounters. Alexander Shaia says the question John's gospel asks is, “How do we receive joy and know union?” What does it look like when Jesus gives more life, more joy, more connection to the divine to someone he meets? In John's gospel, it is the celebration that goes into the night because the best wine arrives. It's a woman who meets Jesus in the middle of the day in a place and in a way that the culture never would have allowed them to meet. And she runs home to gather anyone who will listen to the story of the man who offered her living water and told her about her own life. It's healing a man's son. Telling a paralyzed man to take up his mat and walk. Making a feast for 5,000 of two fish and some bread. It's standing between a crowd of people wanting to administer the death penalty and the woman they are prepared to kill. It's giving sight to a man born blind and restoring him to the fullness of community. Abundance is specific to the story of our lives.

David Lose adds this reflection, “At the heart of the gospel...we are not only saved *from* something but also *for* something, for life in all its abundance here and now...abundant life -- and perhaps salvation itself -- is highly contextual. For the blind

man it is sight. For the single parent it might be companionship and help. For the bullied teen it might be acceptance and an advocate. For the impoverished neighborhood it might be dignity and the chance of self-determination. For the retiree, it might be involvement in a worthwhile cause... Abundant life looks different in different places and to different people, but it always manifests itself as a response to whatever seeks to rob the children of God of their inheritance of life, purpose, and joy."³

We are part of the sheepfold because we are children of God. So we can listen to the story and then ask are we listening to the voices of thieves and bandits? Or are we listening to the voice of the shepherd? Are we following the ones who diminish life or the ones who give it to the full? Absolutely engage this parable from a personal perspective as you reflect on the expansiveness of the Jesus way.

But this is a flexible metaphor, and we can also stand outside the sheepfold and ask what our relationship to the gate is. I think this is where some hard questions come up, and they are the hard questions facing not just each of us individually but all of us as a collective. Are we participating in the work of the thieves and bandits? Or are we participating in the work of the shepherd? Do we care for the sheep within the fold by the way of the gate? Or do we break in and steal? Don't answer too quickly. I think we need to sit with that image and answer those questions honestly.

In David Lose's commentary on this passage, he marks three points: "if these two things are true -- 1) that salvation is more than forgiveness but abundant life itself and 2) abundant life is contextual, defined by release from whatever is robbing us of God's intentions for us -- then I think in this passage there is a profound invitation for us not simply to *listen to Jesus'* promise of salvation and abundant life but actually to *live into* it. How? By joining ourselves to his mission to bring abundant life to all of God's children. That means, of course, that we must first pay attention to what is robbing the children of God near us of life and then stand with them against those forces so that they might have, not just life, but life in abundance."

The invitation Jesus offers is expansive. Hear the call to a life that is whole and release that which robs and steals your joy, your passion, your wellbeing. Hear the call to work for wholeness for all people and join the work of the shepherd who is healing, restoring, and repairing. Hear the call for all of God's children. Listen to the voice of the one who is calling. May you know it and believe. Amen.

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3198>