

Beyond the Gate
John 10.1-10
with Acts 2.42-47 and Psalm 23
Good Shepherd Sunday/4th Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 11, 2014
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

John 10:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

“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. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

John 10:1-10 (*The Message* by Eugene Peterson)

“Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he’s up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won’t follow a stranger’s voice but will scatter because they aren’t used to the sound of it.”

Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. “I’ll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good—sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”

So begins one of those Gospel texts that even the 1st century, real-time listeners did not understand. Mid-paragraph, John lets us know that Jesus is already clarifying and trying to make this illustration work. It's as close as Jesus gets to telling parables in John, and we need to find our context from the very beginning if we are to attempt to unpack what Jesus may have been saying that day.

We have reached the fourth Sunday of Easter but have moved away from resurrection texts and toward scripture that points to the nature of God's work in Jesus. We are back at the point where we left off on March 30 (4th Sunday of Lent). That day's text was John 9, the healing of a man born blind.

Recall with me the 1st century context of devout Jewish leaders at an impasse in their interpretation of sacred texts—stuck in disagreement over the hearing and the living of the word. At the end of John 9, a narrative largely focused on the nature of sin and the practice of law, the two groups do not make peace or agree to disagree for the sake of harmony or unity. There is a split in community. Fellowship is broken between two devout, sincere religious groups who believe differently enough that they can't find a way forward together any longer.

The religious leaders throw the healed man out into the street, and Jesus meets him there—both at the edge of their faith community rather than in the center. Then Jesus tells this story of sheep, gate, thieves, and true gatekeeper.

In his commentary on John's Gospel, Gerard Sloyan (Professor of Religion, Temple University) writes, "It is vain to look for a neat allegory here, namely Jesus as the shepherd, God as the gatekeeper, the enclosed area the place of safety in religious belief, and so on." While there are obvious suggestions when reading through the text, "we do not have the key to the allegory."¹ That's a challenge for us this morning. We have to work to understand this lesson.

The two chapters together can easily and cheaply become a tale of who is "in" and who is "out" — who holds truth, who gets faith right, who most pleases God, who has the exclusive keys to heaven's gates. Jesus' language of robbers and bandits is harsh, so we're right to read an element of right and wrong in this text. But the larger issue is one of the true nature of God's work in the world. Why Jesus? What was so significant about Jesus' life and message that a schism happened within his first century faith community? How did his message differ from dominant leaders of his day?

¹ Gerard Sloyan, *Interpretation: John*, p. 129

What is Jesus describing here? Is this the gate of salvation? Or is this a metaphor about real life? Is this who's in and who's out? Or is it that a popular, steady line of teaching is actually inauthentic and missed the promises of God?

I suggest this morning that the imperfect allegory before us is not a text on the exclusivity of Christ as much as it is a word picture of the message of Christ. That is to say, Jesus as gate and true shepherd is being held up against a way of teaching specific to his day that was life-reducing. Anyone who attempted to speak for God in limiting, harmful, excommunicating ways is spoken of as a thief or bandit. If the message is that God is in the business of kicking and keeping people out of the fold, then the message is false. Jesus as gatekeeper wants his audience to understand that we live with unnecessary limits on our human experience while Christ desires to usher us into abundance.

The gate opens freely, the gatekeeper calls to the sheep who know his voice, and the sheep are brought out with freedom to lie down in green pastures. This is a text about the way God is to be experienced and faith is to be lived out with implications for the kind of community we will be here and now at St. Charles and Broadway.

What is the nature of this real, better, abundant life that Jesus wants us to experience? It may be the better way, but it is not an easy way. This way of abundance has to do with sharing life together, owning our pain and our inadequacy, celebrating imperfection, and telling the truth about our lives. Pastor David Lose writes, "I suspect that authentic abundant life -- which Jesus here describes as flowing from relationship with Jesus and through him with God -- demands that we be more vulnerable than we're most often prepared to be.

So much of our life is about protecting ourselves: giving the impression that we really do have it all together and in this way guarding ourselves against vulnerability. The difficulty, though, is that we cannot experience abundant life without exposing, even lifting up, those very vulnerabilities we want to hide. For the truth of the matter is, as Brene Brown has said in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection* (Hazelden, 2010), we cannot go selectively numb. And in trying to protect ourselves from hurt and disappointment, we have so numbed ourselves that we have cut ourselves off from the opportunity to really feel alive."²

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1550> 2011 post

The thieves and bandits who break into the sheepfold and attempt to direct the sheep are inviting them toward a life that is broken, shame ridden, and shrouded in secret keeping. In our study of John 9 we talked about the fear of being on God's bad side; the chronic anxiety of trying to profess the right words and eschew the wrong behaviors. But when our actions are motivated by fear, we must recall the bold reminder in Timothy's second epistle that "God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."³

So when we are living in the way of fear, we are living in the way of the sheep robbers; not in the way of God's abundance. The idea of abundant living, living into the fullness of God, connects so beautifully with Brene Brown's writing on Love and Belonging.

She writes, "Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance."⁴

Jesus is telling this story just after he and another man have been called sinners and shut out of community because he wants his listeners to hear that the way of God is the way of love. To that end, Brown continues, "We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection."

God's abundance grows in community, with affection and honesty, and it is something to be practiced and cultivated. "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."⁵

Rev. Adam Thomas (Massachusetts) highlights an important word translation that may help us understand just how serious Jesus is about the gate for the welfare of the sheep. In verse 4, "Jesus' choice of words here is telling, but our translation into English hides the special word that Jesus uses. 'When he has *brought out* all of his own, he goes ahead of them,' says Jesus in the version we use in church. In this verse, there's a fairly weak

³ 2Timothy 1.7

⁴ Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, p. 26

⁵ David Lose, *WorkingPreacher*; May 11, 2014

rendering of a Greek word that appears over and over again in the Gospel. We hear this word every time Jesus *casts out* a demon. We hear this word when Jesus makes a whip and *throws* the moneychangers out of the temple. We hear this word when Jesus speaks of *driving out* the ‘ruler of this world.’

In every instance of this word in the Gospel, Jesus is doing some sort of battle: he is pushing, pulling, throwing, yanking, driving, exorcising, casting out. But in this instance about the shepherd and the sheep, the translators decided a nice, safe, neutral translation was better. The shepherd simply ‘brings’ his sheep out of the fold.”⁶

The word distinction is significant. Jesus is busting us out of the confines of the sheepfold. The image allows for movement to return to safety and comfort but also to move freely for pasture, for life, for discovery. The sheepfold is not a place to stay, it is a place to start.

This distinction is essential for us as a church in renewal because we must think of what it is we are inviting people to experience here. Do we desire safety, presentation, appearance, status, and carefully curated lives? Or do we offer a haven in this world for people to bring their imperfect lives together and then become most fully who God created them to be?

Are we making choices out of a sense of God’s direction and promise or out of fear? When we humans perceive we are running out of something, we panic. Be it food, money, friends, a better plan—we scramble to fill that need, and our worst nature is to grasp for security in selfish, unhealthy ways. This is true for each of us as individuals and it is true for a people of faith when we forget that God’s abundance is promised to us.

“Which means...we need to...declare this promise. And it *is* a promise! Abundant life is not something to earn or achieve, buy or barter for. Rather, it is a gift, the sheer gift of a God who loves us... There are so many thieves and bandits in this world who would rob us of life, who would cheat us of abundance. And so Jesus comes as the gatekeeper and good shepherd, the one who knows his sheep -- intimately and truly -- and who calls us by name so that we, hearing the difficult truth about ourselves, may believe and receive the...wonderful truth about God's great and victorious love for us.”⁷

⁶ Rev. Adam Thomas: http://day1.org/2919-young_leaders_series_iii_the_sheepfold

⁷ David Lose, *WorkingPreacher*; May 11, 2014

Sitting with John's text in this Easter season helps us to understand that salvation isn't just about a personal experience or conviction. Jesus' message is about "exploding and expanding" our notion of life here on earth⁸—what kind of gatekeepers are we? are we keeping people out? Are we ushering people in? Do we understand the limitations and fences we choose instead of the freedom of pasture? Jesus tells this story to open our eyes to the gate that welcomes each of us to live fully, truly, as we were created to live. This is the gate of discovery, of rest, of abundance. This is the gate that welcomes each one into community; invites us all to live less on our own and more in common with others.

Earlier we considered the idea of us protecting ourselves and that protection or self-preservation (when we're making choices out of fear and not love) prevents us from living into abundance. This is the sin of living above our humanity in that by aiming to care for ourselves and protect ourselves we are implying we don't need a shepherd or trust God to be a shepherd. We build our own gate and our own sheepfold, then we become the very robbers he rails against. We decide who gets to come in and who stays out. When we act in this way, when we function out of fear, it may well be an innocent, sincere effort to protect ourselves, even an attempt to create "true" Christian community. But instead we are simply pretending at community and preventing ourselves from living the real thing.

Adam Thomas writes, "When we retreat to the safety and comfort of our own personal sheepfolds--whatever they may be--we refuse to participate in the fullness of a life lived in God. Of course, existing in the sheepfold is easier, less demanding. But existence is not life. Ease does not bring joy. And less demanding often means less fulfilling."

"We cannot import into our sheepfolds the abundant life that Christ offers us because the very fullness of that life cannot fit inside a safe, comfortable enclosure. Christ drives us out of the sheepfold so that our lives have the opportunity to expand, that we may embrace God's unrestrained abundance. During this season of Easter, join God in the expansive life found in the Resurrection. Listen for the voice of the shepherd calling you by name, calling you out of complacency. And give Christ the chance to cast you out of your sheepfold so that you may find the fullness of a life lived in the abundance of God."

⁸ Phrasing from David Lose.

“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have *it* more abundantly.” (KJV)

“I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.” (NIV)

“My purpose is to give life in all its fullness.” (TLB)

“I came that they may have *and* enjoy life, and have it in abundance (to the full, till it overflows).” (Amplified Bible)

“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they dreamed of.” (The Message)

This is our invitation—each one here is invited to live in this way—the way of real life that God dreams for us and Jesus pulls us toward.