

## The Gateway of Love

John 10:1-10

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC in Camden, May 3, 2020

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

We shared Psalm 23 as our *Call to Worship* Today. These words are probably dear and familiar to many of us: “God is my shepherd, I shall not want... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” It is a Psalm that has calmed people’s hearts in times of distress over the millennia. Our foremothers and forefathers imagined God as a steadfast, caring, guiding presence who sustains us in all things, seeking our welfare and restoration. A shepherd embodied these qualities for them (though shepherds were also regarded as lower class, rather smelly and unkempt!). Many of us may also bristle at the idea of being sheep and we can’t even dream of congregating like sheep in a sheep pen at the moment due to the virus. Still, there is something beautiful, challenging, and life-giving in these images in our day. Jesus as the Christ adopts this same image to describe who he is in our lives and how he relates to us.

You may also recall a parable in which Jesus describes how the shepherd will risk everything to find that one sheep that has wandered off into dangerous or life denying territory (Matthew 18:12-14). It was his way of indicating that God’s love extends also, and especially, to those on the margins or in trouble that society and religion have judged or abandoned. In today’s passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to himself both as the *Good Shepherd* (John 10:11) and as the *Gate* (John 10:9) to the sheep pen. The main focus of the text is on the contrast between the intention and approach of the shepherd and that of thieves or bandits who only wish to destroy.

During this time of the pandemic, we thankfully get many stories about people who are extending creative love and taking risks to take care of people. They are the shepherds of our day. (I spoke of KP and other medical providers in recent weeks as such examples.) Sadly, we are also hearing of people who are acting like literal thieves by stealing government checks right out of people's mail boxes. NPR just reported that the rate of fraudulent calls aimed at duping us into giving out personal information, donating money, purchasing bogus services are all on the rise. Thieves are playing with our trust by pretending to represent known companies. They are playing with our good-heartedness and also our fears. They are experts at pretense in word and presentation. The radio report cautioned us all to make sure we call the actual companies or agencies to first verify that they are trying to be in touch and get it from the trusted horse's mouth so to speak.

Christ is also calling us to learn to listen as we discern among voices around us. Christ is speaking of a profound familiarity with and trust in God through him. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we can become so familiar with Christ's voice that we can discern quickly whether it is he speaking to us as the shepherd or whether a thief is on the prowl. In other words, we can learn to discern what and who is trustworthy and who is not, who seeks to manipulate truth and our imagination and who does not. The Gospel says that the shepherd is so trusted that he can go straight to the gate and know it will be opened for him. He or she has nothing to hide, nothing to pretend, nothing to distort for his benefit or image. The shepherd is steadfast and known. A thief needs to find a stealth access point. Such a thief can be an external source or we can literally be robbing ourselves of life through distorted ideas and our own reactivity. More on that in a moment.

When the disciples don't understand what Christ is aiming at, he explains further for their own context. He says that there have been others before him with messages that have not been trustworthy. Thankfully, there have always been some among the faithful who have not listened to these voices, he says. This could be an implied critique of the old religious system that tried to convince people that God had to be appeased through a sacrificial cult tightly controlled by the religious elite (strange how this actually crept right back into Christianity). A select group enforced strict rules about who was clean and unclean, who was acceptable and who not, and who could have access to God. Jesus broke through such rules all the time.

This text, which only appears in John, is likely also a reflection of the context of the writer's community. This community included former Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah and were now being turned away from the synagogues of their day. So, we are also dealing with a fledgling Christian community that it is trying to establish its own legitimacy and claim that Jesus is the Messiah.<sup>1</sup> While some Christians read such texts as proof that one can only experience God and receive salvation/healing through faith in Christ, I don't believe that this is a fruitful approach to this text or life. We belong to a denomination that makes room for being whole-hearted Christians who can also embrace the wisdom of other faiths. The challenge is to recognize the universal voice that comes through in the deepest wisdom of various traditions.

I think it matters that Jesus is not only spoken of as the Good Shepherd but also as the Gate. This image of the gate invites us to think of what Jesus is saying in more practical ways. If Christ is the gate and shepherd for us, there is something about his way of living, dying and rising, his push for loving people into life, that mirrors a universal truth to the world through the voice of our particular tradition. What might this truth of the transformative quality of Christ's way of being look like concretely? What is it about our lived experience as people of faith that saves or heals us? In contrast to that faith, what are the messages and practices that "only *steal and kill and destroy (Jn 10:10)?*" while Christ is offering "*abundant life (Jn 10:10)*" instead?

Let me rephrase. We need to keep choosing to step into our world of belonging and embodied living as if through a gate every day. I am struck by how the text affirms that entering through Christ as the gate actually involves a freedom of coming in and going out as healed and trusted people. There is movement and spaciousness here. So what way of being, what attitudes makes movement, spaciousness, and healing possible in our lives and which hinder them?

Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield tells a helpful story about a true encounter in a grocery store (before the days of COVID 19) that exemplifies for me how one person acted as a caring

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<sup>1</sup> Hence the tendency throughout John's Gospel to challenge people to faith in Jesus as the Christ.

shepherdess who provides a caring gateway in a difficult moment.<sup>2</sup> Kornfield was told of this encounter by a friend who had been to a grocery store with her friend, a mom of three grown children. The two older women saw a young mom interact with what was probably a two-and-a-half-year-old boy. This child was pulling things off the shelves and running around while the young mother was getting upset with him. By the time they got to the next aisle, the young mom was shouting at her son. And by the time they made it to the next aisle, she was actually grabbing her son and shaking him really hard. The older mom decided to walk up to this young mom to speak with her.

As the older woman approached the young mom, she said in a bright voice: “My, what a beautiful little boy. How old is he?” The young mother answered apprehensively, “He’s almost three.” The older mom then commented on how curious he seemed, and how her own three children had been just like him in the grocery store, especially when they were young, pulling things off the shelves, so interested in all the colors and the packages. He seemed so bright and intelligent, the woman said. The young mother had the boy in her arms by now, and a shy smile came over her face. Gently brushing his hair out of his eyes, she said, “Yes, he’s very smart and curious. But sometimes he wears me out.” The older woman responded sympathetically, “Yes, they can do that sometimes. They’re so full of energy.” As the two older women walked away, they could hear the mother speaking kindly to the boy about getting home and cooking his dinner: “We’ll have your favorite, macaroni and cheese,” she said. Something important had shifted.

The older woman had made a conscious choice to walk through the gate of compassion and connection to engage the young mom who was caught in her own exhaustion and reactivity. The older woman had offered a voice and presence that was caring and trustworthy. By reconnecting the young mom with the creative and beautiful side of her son, the mom could take a step back and allow for a more spacious interaction again. She, too, could connect with her own love and compassion for her son and for herself. Shaming people takes away energy and love. Shaming is its own kind of thievery, if you will. Sometimes we create more disconnect for ourselves with our own

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<sup>2</sup> I heard Jack Kornfield tell this story as part of a talk on learning to identify our emotions. Parts of the story are virtually verbatim.

words and thoughts without input from others. We all get caught in frustrations and fears, especially at this time of dealing with a pandemic. We can get reactive because we are afraid. We can also let our anger carry us away from deeper sources of compassion and calm. (This is not to say that anger doesn't have a place in our lives).

Christ's way is the way of solidarity amidst struggle. Christ lifted people out of isolation and shame as well as distorted ways of living and loving. He embraced his own fear and extended compassion to all. Christ saw the whole person and not just their individual struggles. He modeled for us how we have to undergo a million smaller deaths each day as we let go of the ego's attempts to protect, condemn or legitimate itself. Instead we can learn to listen for the voices that remind us that we are first and foremost all beloved children of God. The risen Christ is still among us by the power of the Holy Spirit, opening doors/gates for us right in the midst of our lives. He is still leading us forward so that we can freely drink from the fresh waters of love, and be fed with gifts of grace each day in greener pastures. This is who and how God is. May the Holy Spirit empower us each day to discern Christ's voice leading us in ways that create spaciousness, abundance and belonging at the same time. Thanks be to God.