

**“Is Jesus-the-Gate Good News?”**

**John 10:1-10**

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**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter**

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I never did like the gates on gated communities all that much. That cross arm to remind you that some belong and some do not. A gate to remind you that someone else has to grant you access beyond this point. A barrier to remind you that this is someone else's territory where others will judge whether or not you are a threat. I never liked the gates on communities all that much, but here it is in scripture. Jesus is the gate and Jesus is the shepherd who takes care of the sheep.

Sometimes it seems like the church has become a kind of gated community with access cards that it passes out to people willing to sign its residential covenants. Willing to state that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life? Sign here for exclusive access. Judging from the success of some churches in America, there are a lot of Christians attracted to that kind of gated community. Who wouldn't want exclusive access to life after death in exchange for a simple willingness to agree to a few doctrinal statements? Who wouldn't agree to adopt a few sentences if those few sentences guaranteed eternal life? It's a bargain when you think about it.

Unfortunately, that deal is not really the one that Jesus seems to be offering at least not in the way that it's been sold to some of us. A lot of Christians read this text on the Good Shepherd as if Jesus just stepped up into a pulpit to give a theological declaration. But actually he's in the middle of a conflict. Just before this text, Jesus has given sight to a man born blind. He's brought healing. And rather than celebrate God's healing power, the religious leaders in the text are worried about whether Jesus has authority to do this or not. While he's healing people – transforming their lives, they're arguing over whether he's got the right credentials. You can tell a good shepherd, Jesus argues, by how well they take care of the sheep.

Now I've addressed the history behind the Gospel of John countless times. The way John's community throws their Jewish cousins under the bus partly out of anger and hurt, partly out of spite, partly out of self-interest – to make Jews look like more like the enemies of Jesus instead of the Romans – it was safer for the church that way. But we do not read scripture solely to uncover the author's original intent. The Holy Spirit can still speak through a text. That's the wisdom of our tradition. And there is more wisdom to be gleaned from this text especially coming off a week when some religious leaders in our day – some followers of Jesus – have clearly neglected the sheep.

On the same day that the House of Representatives passed a bill that is likely to rob millions of Americans of health insurance, some religious leaders expended their authority complaining about their religious freedom being under attack. Apparently it's more important to some Christian leaders to be able to discriminate against gay and lesbian people than it is to protect the health care of million of people on the margins. What good is religious freedom if we're not using it to speak for the poor? What good is religious freedom for followers of Jesus if we're not

using it to do the healing that Jesus asked us to do? What good is religious freedom if we're not exercising it for justice for the oppressed?

The church has become a kind of gated community which is one reason that many people have checked out of it. They don't need another gated community in a world already divided by race, class, nationality, and economics. They don't need more fear cloaked in religious language which most thinking people can see is a deadly, deadly mix. They don't get meaning from a church whose sole mission in the world seems to be its own self-preservation. Protecting its own behind has never been the mission of the church.

When the church stands before Jesus, he's not going to ask us whether we did our best to secure our own religious freedom, as if preachers in this country didn't already have the right to speak our minds from the pulpit. He's not going to ask us whether we got the most people to regurgitate our core teachings as important as they are. He's not going to ask us whether we protected North American white Christian culture from change. We know what he's going to ask us. He's going to ask us when you saw hungry people did you do your best to feed them? When you saw people who barely had clothes on their backs did you give them some clothes? When people got locked up, did you go and visit them? When they were sick, did you help them get well with your prayers, your visits, and your justice seeking? We know what he's going to ask us because he told us it already.

Even in John's cantankerous gospel, doctrinal conviction is not separated from action. Jesus is the Good Shepherd but you cannot understand what a good shepherd is without seeing what Jesus does. This good shepherd brings a blind man out of isolation and into community. He's brings him from the margins of the story into the center of the story. He connects the man's healing not to his lack of sin, but to God's goodness. That's who this good shepherd is. That's what salvation is – not some standalone insurance policy that guarantees post-mortem privileges, but abundant life that starts right now and continues beyond the grave; community that won't be shut down by the powers of death.

Jesus says that he is the *good* shepherd probably because there are more examples of "bad shepherds" in scripture than good ones. Bad shepherds – those leaders who fail to remember that God judges all leadership by how well it fulfills its responsibility to look out for the most vulnerable among us. Like those bad shepherds in the Old Testament book of Ezekiel: "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds *feed* the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (Ezekiel 34:2-4). If there is a hell, the people most likely to go there, according to scripture, are not people threatening religious freedom. They are not people who haven't gotten their doctrine entirely correct. They are leaders neglecting or harming the people they are charged to protect.

As someone who reacts negatively to gated communities, Jesus has me taking another look. There are a whole lot of sheep in our world desperate for a good shepherd to protect them. Sheep vulnerable to having their health care ripped out

from under them. Sheep vulnerable to being deported from their loved ones because our Congress can't come up with a common-sense immigration plan. Sheep vulnerable to being locked up in our nation that has become the leading jailer in the world. Sheep looking for the basic things that most people want – a safe place to live, enough pasture to graze on, and community to keep you from being alone. There are plenty children of God who are in need of protections from bad shepherds who threaten the very sheep they are charged to protect.

And if that's the kind of shepherd that Jesus promises to be for the church, maybe we shouldn't be so quick to give up on the doctrine that John attaches to him. Maybe the problem with the church isn't that Christians are quick to state that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life; that Jesus is the gate; that Jesus is the way to salvation. Maybe the problem with the church is our inability to live as though that were true. Our failure to see that doctrinal conviction is never separated from what Jesus does in the world. This Palestinian shepherd puts his life between sheep and those who come to attack them. This gate swings open to people who have been pushed to the margins. This Shepherd gives his life for the sake of the sheep. Maybe we don't need to dampen the conviction that Jesus is the Way – we need more Christians to live as though this self-giving Way were true.

If the church lived as though we believed in that kind of self-giving power, non-Christians wouldn't have to worry that this Gospel that we preach might be bad news for them. Gay and lesbian people wouldn't have to wonder why the church cares more about excluding them than it does about loving all people. And poor people wouldn't have to scratch their heads to figure out why a small but very loud and very organized part of the church cares more about being able to use their tax free donations to run political ads endorsing candidates than in healing actual human beings who are hurting in our land.

We might all discover again that salvation is a joyful gift to world that Jesus wants to give to more people. It's a gift to save a people on the edge of forgetting our purpose for living, our reason for being – to love and serve – the only things that brings joy that lasts. We might all discover again that Jesus isn't a club to be wielded by religious leaders. He is the one who judges and forgives us, who keeps us honest and humble. He is the one who commands us to love one another, the one who teaches us that our neighbor is more than the person living next door. He is the Good Shepherd who shows us the door to abundant living – available right now – for anyone hungry for community, for connection, for purpose, for God in your life.