

Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday of Easter – Jesus the Good Shepherd Sunday
Acts 4:5-12, John 10:1-20
“Who is at The Gate?” by Rev. Sue Trigger

EPISTLE LESSON

Acts 4:5-12

(CEB)

5 The next day the leaders, elders, and legal experts gathered in Jerusalem, **6** along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest’s family. **7** They had Peter and John brought before them and asked, “By what power or in what name did you do this?”

8 Then Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, answered, “Leaders of the people and elders, **9** are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? **10** If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. **11** This Jesus is the stone you builders rejected; he has become the cornerstone! **12** Salvation can be found in no one else. Throughout the whole world, no other name has been given among humans through which we must be saved.”

GOSPEL LESSON

John 10:1-20

LUMO video

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. **2** The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5** They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” **6** Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

11 “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12** The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. **13** The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. **14** I am the good

shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, **15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. **16** I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. **17** For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. **18** No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”

19 Again the Jews were divided because of these words. **20** Many of them were saying, “He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?”

I struggled with this Scripture reading in the gospel of John for a very long time. I grew up in what would be described as a conservative Presbyterian church. When I graduated from High School I lived a very ‘Project Runway’ lifestyle when it came to faith. If you’ve seen the show you will recall the phrase they use to describe how the show works, “You’re either in or you’re out.” I would define my theological world view as a black and white Reformed faith. I understood the Bible to be literal, it says what it means and it means what it says. I believed you were saved or you weren’t. I believed that Christianity was superior to all other religions. You believe in Christ or you are going to hell. I believed these things, but I wasn’t entirely comfortable with them.

It was during my college years that I really began to wrestle with my beliefs. I was president of Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship and I became increasingly uncomfortable with the way we spoke of non-Christians as sinners who needed us righteous people to save them by bringing them to Jesus. I began to question this one year when I openly condemned my classmates and told them they were going to hell because they were dressing up as witches and Satan on Halloween. It didn’t get invited to any parties. I began to question how righteousness could mean judging others. I questioned how a God whose essence is love could be so rigid. Most of all, I couldn’t understand how I could be told that God wasn’t calling me to be an

ordained pastor simply because of my gender. That was the issue that burned in my soul and sent me on a spiritual journey.

So I questioned the theological world view I was raised in. I went to Seminary filled with questions. What I discovered was that Biblical interpretation is the problem. Another way to say it is that human beings are the problem. In our effort to understand God, we filter everything through a funnel of human intellect. Even the Bible came to us through human intellect. I realized that how we understand what is on the pages of our bibles requires a great deal of study. I also discovered that there are many great theologians whose Biblically rooted beliefs are different from those I grew up with.

So today I want to think about this reading from the gospel of John from a different theological world view than the one I learned as a child. I want to begin with the identity of Jesus. When I look at today's reading my first question is who is at the gate? It seems obvious – it's Jesus. So the message is clear then, isn't it? Only those who believe in Jesus will enter. Christians have interpreted this to mean that only Christians will enter the kingdom of heaven. But I want to suggest that that's a pretty big leap.

We need to put the gospel into its historical context. One of the obvious things we know is that when Jesus was living on earth he was a Jew. He wasn't a casual H and P Jew, Hanukah and Passover, he was a deeply religious, faithfully practicing Jew. He went to the Synagogue for study and prayer, he journeyed with his family and the disciples to celebrate the festivals and holidays of his faith. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that he was planning to create a community that would leave the Jewish tradition behind. He said that Peter would become the rock upon which he would build his church, but he also said that he did not come to abolish the Law of Moses, but to fulfill it. There is no indication that he intends to create a sheep fold

that completely leaves out his Jewish family of faith. It would be more accurate to say that he understood himself as a reformer of the faith.

So when Jesus said he was the gate to the sheep pen, I ask, who is Jesus? We believe Jesus is the way, right? “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one enters except by me,” he said. Does that mean only Christians get in? What about the people of the Islamic faith who believe in the virgin birth of Jesus and honor him as the greatest of all the prophets? What about the Jews who believe in the one and same God Jesus said he was one with? Will Jesus let them through the gate?

If you continue on in the gospel, Jesus was quite clear about his identity. In John 10: vs. 25 – 30. Jesus answered, “I told you already, but you did not believe. I do miracles in my Father’s name. Those miracles show who I am. But you don’t believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me. Verse 30 says, “The Father and I are one.”

When Mitch and I lived in New Jersey we were part of an interfaith group of clergy. In that group was a Jewish rabbi, an Islamic Imam, two Catholic priests, two Methodist pastors, a Lutheran and two Presbyterians. We gathered for lunch regularly and learned much from each other. It was at one of those lunches that Rabbi Charlie explained the greatest issue the Jews have with Christians. “Christians worship three gods.” He said. That was a head cock moment. I asked him to explain. “Christians claim that they worship one God, but in practice they worship three. They say that Jesus must be worshipped and act as if he is worshipped above even the Father. They speak of the Holy Spirit as another god who functions separately from the other two. From our perspective”, he said, “the doctrine of the Trinity looks like the worship of three Gods.” I spent a lot of time thinking about his words. He was right. Christians have elevated Jesus above God. How often do you hear a Christian say you must believe in God to be saved? Whether we realize

it or not, Christians have created a hierarchy of God that has led to violence and hatred between people of God for generations; people God loves deeply and equally. I understand how that happens. It is easy to simply read the Scriptures that speak of Jesus as the way and forget that when Jesus speaks of himself he is coming from the perspective that he is one with God. So when Jesus says, I am the gate, is he saying he is separate from God? Does he claim to be higher than God? Not at all.

He explains how this oneness with God works in verse 16, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.” I used to think that Jesus meant that the Jews were the sheep that do not belong to his fold. But when you put it in its historical context, you find that Jesus was speaking to fellow Jews in this reading. That would most likely make the gentile Christians the sheep that do not belong to the fold he was speaking of. It was Christians that he must also bring into the sheep fold.

I have another picture of a sheep pen that gives us a good illustration of what Jesus may have been envisioning. (*show second sheep pen pic.*) If you look at the center of the pen you will notice that there is one main entrance that funnels the sheep into a sheep fold that has a number of pens. “There are other sheep that are not of this fold, but I must bring them in also.” You can imagine each of these pens being filled with different groups of sheep. It was not uncommon in that time for there to be several flocks gathered together into one pen at night. Priests and Kings often owned sheep that they entrusted to a shepherd to care for alongside the shepherd’s sheep. In this sheep fold, different flocks gather together as one.

Jesus is the gate. When we look at readings like today’s, it is important for us, as Christians, to remember that we don’t worship three Gods; Jesus and God and the Holy Spirit are one. There is not a God of the Old Testament who is different from the God of the New Testament. We worship one God. Jesus said, “Whoever enters by me (the one

God) will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” There will be one flock and one shepherd.

When we look at it from this perspective, the meaning of this passage shifts from believing in a particular persona of the Trinity to a teaching about what it means to be a follower of the shepherd. Jesus explains in verse 3. “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” It’s all about relationships. Our relationship with God is personal. God knows us and calls us by name. And it’s about our relationships with others. We follow the shepherd out into the world.

Another time when we had had lunch with our interfaith colleagues we were preparing to leave one of our favorite restaurants. We headed out the door with Rabbi Charlie who said, “I have to get back to the office and work on a class I am teaching on The Way.” That was another head cock moment. Yes, he said. The Way was around a long time before Jesus. Well I had to think about that for a while. But of course it was. The very heart of Jesus’ teaching is the heart of the Torah, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:4-5) Jesus added that the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. To follow the good shepherd is to go out into the world and love others. It really isn’t that complicated. It only gets complicated when we try to funnel it through human intellect.

The difficulty is that we are always trying to bring the ways of the world into our understanding of God. Even in the Church we get so focused on whose right and who’s wrong, who’s in and who’s out, that we lose sight of the most important part of Jesus’ message. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” What is the way to that abundant life? The way is found when we follow the shepherd. As someone who is not a part of the Jewish faith, I know the shepherd best through the teachings of Jesus, who is God with us. Our Jewish siblings know the Lord as Adonai. Our Islamic siblings speak of Allah. We each bring many names, but we worship one God.

I wonder what would happen to the sheep fold if we shifted our focus from the ways of the world that drive us to want to be right, but only serve to divide us. What if we followed the good shepherd who leads us with unconditional, all-inclusive love? What if we shifted our focus from which persona of God is more important, and simply worshiped the one God we profess belief in? What if we lived our lives seeking to bring all people together no matter their gender, race, nationality or creed? You know, Jesus told us what that would look like, he said it would look like the kingdom of God. May God help us to always follow the way of the good shepherd and may God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.