

## Are You A Door?

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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It's Good Shepherd Sunday - the lectionary entry every year on the fourth Sunday of Easter, where we consider Psalm 23 and stories from John 10 where Jesus speaks of himself as a gate, and a shepherd whose goal is to protect the flock.

John 10:1-11

'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. <sup>11</sup> 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

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It happened like this, one Sunday morning twenty years ago. Ten minutes before the Prelude, I was bustling around before worship at the church I served then, figuring out something on the chancel, and I happened to look out to see a newcomer who looked to be a young man in jeans and a

ballcap. The greeter said hello and gave him a bulletin. He slipped into the back pew quietly and waited for worship to begin. Maybe he wanted to get there early to figure out how the hymnals worked. Maybe the walk didn't take as long as he thought it would. Maybe he was in from out of town. Maybe someone he loved needed prayer. Maybe he didn't even mean to come to church that day but some heartache felt eased just a bit when he saw the church sign and found that the door was unlocked and he came in. I don't quite know why that visitor showed up that day, because I never got the chance to talk with him.

One of our longtime members saw him about the same time I did, and scooted right over to him. They spoke for a minute and then I saw him leave, walking back out the way he had come. At coffee hour, I asked her about it. "Well, I went over to tell him we don't wear ballcaps in the sanctuary...and he left. Young people these days."

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Let me get to John 10, Pilgrims.

Today we have only a tiny fraction of a longer passage, and context is crucial here, so let me set the stage. This morning's story really begins with John 9's recounting of the healing of a man born blind on the sabbath. Jesus' disciples ask what sin has caused the man to be blind but Jesus will not fall into the trap of connecting sin and illness. Jesus - to paraphrase - says, it's not his fault, it's not his parents' fault either - but let me show you God's love and healing right here. Jesus heals this man. But the man's neighbors cannot recognize him. Next comes a conflict between Jesus and a group of Pharisees, a small group of religious authorities.<sup>1</sup> (Let me note here the complexity of John's Gospel in relation to portrayals of the Jewish community - but even in John, Jesus continually lifts up his commitment to his Jewish faith. We are not to read this conflict as support for supersessionism.)

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<sup>1</sup> Note that John often uses the term "the Jews" to refer to a small group of religious authorities. That phrasing should not be used as an indictment of the entire Jewish community.

The conflict continues with this small group of Pharisees casting out the newly healed and sighted man. Chapter 9 ends with Jesus seeking the man out once more, and inviting him into Jesus' own community. The small group of Pharisees have cause to ask aloud: are we also blind? I take that question as an indication of these individuals beginning...edging toward...changing their minds - particularly about who belongs in their community.

This is where the text that Lesley read us picks up.

Chapter 10 includes Jesus' further exploration of his purpose - and it's a dive into invitation and the value of community.

Our text this morning is Jesus' sermon on why this man - and others who might otherwise be rejected - should be invited into the flock. As much as the disciples, as much as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and Joanna, as much as every person in the community of the gospel of John, this newly healed man is the beloved sheep who comes into the safety of the sheepfold. He is not a sinner and Jesus does not shame him or his family. This beloved child of God comes via the gate that has been opened to him - opened to him when Jesus reaches out to him. He comes into the flock having heard and recognized the voice of the Shepherd.

Elisabeth Johnson says it beautifully: "For the blind man, salvation is not only receiving his physical sight but also spiritual sight, recognizing who Jesus is, believing in him, and becoming part of his community. He followed the voice of Jesus before he could see him, and it led to new life. His days of isolation are over; he now knows himself to be a valued member of Jesus' flock, cared for and protected."<sup>2</sup>

The small group of religious authorities feel the man should be excluded. I invite you to hear that moment with double meaning: the gospel writer remembering a moment when Jesus modeled inclusion by his actions - and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-of-easter/commentary-on-john-101-10-3>

the writer of John speaking to a conflict within their church community. Someone in the Johannine church was fretting and fussing about what kind of people should be welcome and this writer wanted them to remember this moment in Jesus' ministry where inclusion and love were chosen instead of exclusion and shame.

How often do we fret and fuss over who belongs? We aspire to welcome everyone - yet sometimes our words, and sometimes our non-verbal deeds, are exclusive. I say we, because sometimes my actions turn people away. And every church I've ever been part of has wondered into exclusive behaviors, sometimes.

We wonder who qualifies, we divide along the lines of belief or background or demographic, or car driven or clothes worn.

I didn't tell the story of the guy wearing the baseball cap to shame my church member from 20 years ago. I tell the story to highlight that we all muff it, sometimes. She was often the first to welcome the stranger, to offer Christian hospitality. And we had good conversations after that. I don't think she ever again led with a dress code.

Now, Pilgrim Church. This congregation is one of the most welcoming and inclusive that I've served. Newcomers really do feel invited into the flock.

We do invitation and welcome really well. We don't ask new folks to take off their ballcaps (metaphorically or otherwise) - we introduce ourselves and make sure they have company if they want to stay for lemonade.

And...there have been times we've said, not them.

They're not like us.

We don't talk about such things here.

That makes us uncomfortable.

And we neglect to go searching when one of our own wonders off.

I've also wondered lately about folks who are already in our flock, too - folks whose wounds are tender. Jesus' gate metaphor wasn't about keeping people in or out - it was about making sure the whole flock felt protected, assured, cared for. That's one of the values of community that Jesus is describing when he says he's come that the flock may have life and life abundant. Abundant and full life is life (to quote Matt Myer-Boulton) in "love and intimacy with God, like the trusting companionship of sheep and shepherd."<sup>3</sup> Abundant life in community is an experience of mercy and care and wholeness - acceptance even when we are wounded, compassion when we are hurting, grace without shame. Abundant life in community includes being gathered up into love when we need it the most.

Jesus, the One we follow, over and over again said: come on in. Come in the door. There is a place for you, and other sheep too - and in this place there is safety and love and mercy. Come in the door if you are healed - or if you are in search of healing.

If Jesus were opening the gate today, making sure the sheep were safe, I think he would be attending to, and protecting, and naming aloud, and blessing and building community. And guess what? The church is the body of Christ in this moment of time.

As a church I think this works on a group level - like being Open and Affirming and physically accessible - and I think this works on an individual level - figuring out how to be in loving community with the person you don't understand or don't like. Calling the person who's wondered off. This is also about talking openly about things we might feel uncomfortable about: our bodies, our mental health, money. And this is about literally protecting our flock - our safe church policy comes to mind.

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<sup>3</sup> saltproject.org

Jesus didn't just say, come in if you want to. He went to the ones others had cast out and sought out the lost.

And to them and to us, he said:

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Jesus, the one we follow, was the gate and the shepherd, making sure the flock knew where home was and knew home was safe.

May it be so, in this sheepfold, too. Amen.