

“God our Good Shepherd: The Gate”

Psalm 23, John 10:7, 10b-18, Matthew 11:28-30

Pastor James York

April 25, 2021

Prayer for Understanding God never let our reason distort your truth. Holy Spirit inspire us and reveal your will to each of us. Amen

On the dairy farm, we had numerous gates to care for the wellbeing of the animals. Most of the gates enhanced the rhythm of life by having the animal in the ideal place at the ideal time. Daily gates opened for the animals to enjoy exercise lots and closed to keep the animals safe in the barn. In the winter, if the cows were outside too long in the cold, they would get frostbit udders. In the spring, too long in the sun, they would get sunburned udders. Milking 116 cows with frostbit or sunburned udders is an awful experience for both the cow and the milker. In the spring, the exercise lot had fresh grass which is like chocolate to cows. Grass is low in nutritional value. Overeating grass gave the cows diarrhea, gave their milk an undesirable taste, and malnourished them. In the spring, our herd of cows could easily eat an entire field of sprouting corn. Our gates kept the cows out so the corn could mature to be a nutritious and delicious feed source for the entire year. Gates directed the animals to the ideal food source for their age and stage of lactation. Gates directed the animals to get their vaccinations and health checkups. Gates created space for us to clean, maintain, and spread fresh straw on their beds.

It is in the context of caring for animals that Jesus says, “I am the gate,” so “we may have abundant life.” **John 10:7, 10b-18 NRSV Jesus said. “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down their life for the sheep. 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. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep. 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. For this reason God loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 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 God.”**

The dairy animals self-divided themselves into groups. There was a group that went right for the shady area to lounge all day, another group that exercised, watching each other run, leap, and kick up their heels, another group was rebellious constantly walking the perimeter looking for a weak spot in the fence. This group would sometimes get out. When we would bring this group back, the lounging group would shake their heads and raise their noses. There was a gang group lead by the alpha animal that was always leading the group somewhere, the followers always in the same pecking order.

Jonathan Sacks explains how people instinctively form groups. Jonathan reverses a popular theory. “It is not our religion that makes us violent. Instead, it is our tendency for violence that gives rise to our religious impulse. People are born with two sets of primal instincts, altruism toward those in our own group and aggression toward others. In daily life, this dynamic shows up in everything from football rivalry, political affiliation, racial division and armed combat.” Jonathan explains. “Since most of us need to feel good about ourselves while we are acting aggressively toward others, we develop psychological mechanisms such as splitting, projection and scapegoating, which allow us to assign goodness to our group and badness to the other group. This not only relieves us of having to deal with the goodness and badness inside our own group; it also frees us to believe that our violence against the other group is essentially altruistic.” Jonathan concludes, “We bond best with our group when we confront an eternal enemy.”

Every person is God’s beloved child. God will bring us back together. God will gather all the groups of people together. God is the gate who provides a way back home for everyone. Jesus said, “I am the gate. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, so there will be one flock.”

Pastor Susan Andrews said, “My friends, amidst all the voices, there is a Voice—making us to lie down by still waters, leading us with vision on paths of righteousness,

walking with us in the darkest valley of our living. But we must listen, and we must learn and we must follow. That is our hope—and that is our calling.”

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *Holy Envy* writes, “When my religion tries to come between me and my neighbor, I will choose my neighbor. Jesus never commanded me to love my religion.”

Jonathan Sacks said, “The supreme religious challenge is to see God’s image in one who is not in our image.” Therefore, the stranger, the one who connects with God through a different religion, the one who does not look, think, or act like the rest of us—may offer us our best chance at seeing past our own reflections in the mirror to the God we did not make up.

When the resurrected Jesus appeared, the disciples were slow to recognize Jesus. Perhaps the resurrected Jesus, since he was coming from heaven where all are one harmonious family, had features from every person. Perhaps the resurrected Jesus was reflecting their humanity back to them, both familiar and strange, so that they never got tired of searching each other’s faces, and strangers faces, for some sign of Jesus. Perhaps the disciples’ passion to spread the good news of God’s grace to everyone was an outcome of their resurrection transformation. Transformed from an urge to sort, divide, and judge people to uniting, gathering, and loving all people.

Amid all the voices that tell us to fear, judge, divide and hate. God keeps calling us to love. God is the gate who brings all people together.

Religion is a specific set of organized beliefs and practices shared by a group. Spirituality seeks to perceive God and grow in love. Religion is restriction by a set of rules, for the most part instituted by humanity. Fear is often used by religious leaders to get people to follow their rules. Spirituality is freedom, to evolve into the best human one can be in the current moment then they grow in love, continuously evolving in an ever-expanding spiral of joy and love. Religion tries to define God. Spirituality encourages questions, seeking and discovering God. Religion separates. Spirituality unites.

Matthew 11:28-30 MSG Jesus said. “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you will recover your life. I will show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you will learn to live freely and lightly.”

Preaching professor Anna Carter Florence wrote, “We go out and we come in. The gate marks a place to rest and a place to graze. The rhythm of in and out is necessary to life because the green pastures are outside the gate; a sheep that flat out refuses to go out will die. Likewise, a sheep that flat-out refuses to go in, when the call comes, may soon be lost in the night. So, the gate is part of life and key to life, but not because it keeps us out or in. It simply marks the boundary between what we are to do in each space. The secret of saving the life of a sheep is to know when it is time to go out and when it is time to come back in. The point is to listen to the voice of the shepherd—the voice you recognize above all others—and follow that call.”

The rhythm of life, time to rest, time to work, space to be with others, space to be alone, time to give, time to receive, time to learn, time to teach, time to follow, time to lead. God calls us to ideal being every moment of our lives and provides a gate to enter into the ideal space and a gate to protect us in that space.

God is the gate, portal, channel, means, way, we receive love, joy, peace, gifts, healing, nourishment, understanding, inspiration, motivation, and every goodness. God is the gate, portal, channel, means, way our being is inspired to share, give, serve, care, rejoice, help, and love. God as the gate calls us to abundant life, to the unforced rhythms of grace.

It might help to think of God as an ever flowing, growing river of grace. Sometimes we are inclined to swim upstream where there were more restrictions, the banks were narrow and easily defined. Swimming upstream is exhausting. God calls us to swim with the current to explore the ever-growing, grandest of grace and at times to float in awe and wonder being transformed and rejuvenated.

Chaplain and professor Peter Gomes wrote, “As a historian, I am often asked to what great period of history I would care to return, and I can think of none, for every age has fallen short of what the good news promised, and no past age has achieved an instance of grace for which I would sacrifice one second of the future. When I say, as I often do, that our best days are ahead of us, I truly believe that the good news that Jesus preached has yet to be experienced, for it goes before us, as did Jesus himself on Easter morning.”

God is our gate. God is calling us to explore and share the ever-growing, good news. God is everyone’s gate, for God will ultimately bring us all together to enjoy green pastures and still waters. God is calling us to be vessels, cups, of overflowing joyful love. For surely, we all will dwell in the house of the Lord together forever.

The ultimate message of our good shepherd is to enjoy God’s love and share love. Next week we will explore together the expansive love of our shepherd God. Amen