

The Open Gate

Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10

Whitefish UMC

Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2011

- † May 2nd marked an eventful day—not only for our family in the wedding of our only child—but for the world as well. We’ll remember May 2nd for one reason; the world will remember it as the day Osama bin Laden was killed in a compound in plain sight in Pakistan.
- † We happened to be out of the country on May 2nd, and so when we returned to the United States, security concerns dominated the scene at entry ports into our country. Our passports received extra scrutiny, as did our faces. As we returned to the U. S., we had to pass through many gatekeepers.
- † And so the image of Jesus as gatekeeper is not one with which I’m totally comfortable. It evokes images of security lines and checkpoints, bouncers and watchdogs, razor wire fencing, and border guards. It stirs up negative feelings—rejection, control, fear, and separation. And these are things I don’t associate with Jesus.
- † When I think of Jesus, I don’t think of him as a gatekeeper—afterall, he ate with sinners, befriended the outcast, healed the lame and the blind and the unclean, and appeared first at the tomb to women.
- † But in the passage Marilyn just read, he claims himself as the gate. Now many supposed followers of Jesus have used this passage to say it is about Jesus deciding who is in and who is out, and dividing between people of different faiths. But if we dig deeper, we see something else entirely.

- † The shepherd calls to the sheep by name and leads them out. He goes ahead of them and the sheep follow. Again Jesus says, “I am the gate,” and continues, “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. He never proscribes who can come in and who can’t. There are no border guards and no checkpoints, no profiled undesirables—nothing like that.
- † The purpose of the gate isn’t to keep some people in and some people out. There is no dividing line between good and bad, welcome and not welcome, desirable and undesirable. This shepherd isn’t trying to divide but to protect. Jesus IS the gate. He calls; we come in and go out and we come in again. He calls us to a safe place to pasture and to rest, to be saved so we can go out and invite others in as well.
- † But over the years, civilizations and nations, and even the church, have used these distinctions to divide and confuse under the guise of protection. We’ve been found to be gatekeeping in the name of Christ and yet doing things Jesus would never do or have us do. The fine lines between dividing and protecting can be blurry and hard to distinguish. Witness the division of whites and blacks, the suppression of women’s rights in the name of “protection of the weaker sex.” You can name others as well.
- † In a wonderful sermon on this text, Dana Ferguson, the Executive Assistant at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, where one of my friends (and also my sister Penny’s pastor) was associate pastor, writes of Dr. Martin Luther King’s impassioned plea to pastors in Alabama who advised him and other civil rights leaders to be patient in their efforts to end segregation. They called his efforts “unwise and untimely.” These clergymen wanted to reinforce the gate of civil rights until “the time was right.” In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail, King wrote:

† *I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children . . .*

† King's list of the appalling actions and effects of racism continue and is followed by this:

† *When you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience. (As reprinted in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, pp. 155–156)*

† “When the shepherd has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.” And so this question becomes ever so important: Do we know the voice of the shepherd? Have we been in conversation often enough with the shepherd that we can hear his voice when we are called? Have we trusted the shepherd enough to answer?

† Anna Carter Florence, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Columbia Seminary, puts it this way:

† *We go out and we come in even when we are saved. 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. (Lectionary Homiletics, p. 15)*

† Recognition comes as we practice conversing with God day in and day out so that it is a familiar conversation and voice we know, so that when Jesus comes calling, we can answer—not later, not later than the situation needs, or never, but then—that we might answer the voice of the shepherd calling us to what’s ahead. Our job is to listen for the voice telling us when it is time to move, when we are being called to the next task.

† The voice tells us that we are known, cared for, tended, protected, and offered life rather than death and conveys the essence of the nature of God’s care for us. In this reassurance are implications for Christians and congregations. Jesus is the gate and those who enter through the gate become the shepherds to others. The obligation for knowing one another by name, offering care and nurture, and being trustworthy falls upon all of us who enter by the gate. All Christians are obligated to become good shepherds to one another, to be neighbors who are available as confidants to one another and who seek others out when we encounter troubles of our own (Lectionary Homiletics, p. 13).

- † Recently, a pastor friend posted a link to a disturbing article in *The Atlantic* magazine. It's titled "The Geography of Hate," by Richard Florida. It begins:
- † "With the death of Osama bin Laden, many believe that Al Qaeda was dealt a mortal blow. Time will tell, but as we learned from the Oklahoma City bombing and Nidal Malik Hasan's rampage at Fort Hood, we have much to fear from our own home grown extremists. And not just from "lone nuts" acting on their own.
- † Since 2000, the number of organized hate groups -- from white nationalists, neo-Nazis and racist skinheads to border vigilantes and black separatist organizations -- has climbed by more than 50 percent, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Their rise has been fueled by growing anxiety over jobs, immigration, racial and ethnic diversity, the election of Barack Obama as America's first black president, and the lingering economic crisis. Most of them merely espouse violent theories; some of them are stock-piling weapons and actively planning attacks.
- † But not all people and places hate equally; some regions of the United States -- at least within some sectors of their populations -- are virtual hate hatcheries. What is the geography of hate groups and organizations? Why are some regions more susceptible to them?"
- † Sadly, the article goes on to detail that Montana has the highest per capita concentration of hate groups, followed closely by Mississippi, and then Arkansas, Wyoming, and Idaho. Montana has 13.8 hate groups per million people, and of course, our population is just below one million.
- † What other factors are associated with hate groups besides geography? The article cites Red state/Blue state politics; income and poverty; religion, and

economic class. Correlation does not imply causation, and Montana and Mississippi are fairly extreme outliers, which may skew results somewhat.

- † But what's frightening is that religion plays such a strong part in the spawning of these hate groups. We've seen our fair share in the Flathead lately with the arrival of an alleged "pastor" from Florida who spouts hateful pronouncements in the name of Christianity.
- † So why should we care? Because the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to counter such distortions with the Voice of the Shepherd, which calls for love, compassion, healing, and inclusion—not hateful division.
- † As Dana Ferguson says so poignantly, "The shepherd calls by name, tends, protects, and has gone ahead of us. And now it is ours to tend the pasture—to be about the work of the gate and the keeper. Just as we have been welcomed, it is ours to welcome in the sheep, God's people, and to provide for safe pasture. And then we are to be found listening to the voice so that when the safe pastures of the world are threatened, when the thieves are threatening to steal life, we might hear from our shepherd the next task ahead."
- † Soon after she spoke these words in church, Dana died from heart failure at age 42, suffering complications from cancer treatment and leaving her husband and two young children behind. From the beginning of her life, as a little child, Dana was a healer, and champion for the rights of the poor and the oppressed. Her first church was in Memphis—Idlewild Presbyterian, where she started a transitional housing program for the homeless. She went on to urge the affluent Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago to buy land near the infamous Cabrini Green Housing Projects. It is now a thriving urban garden shared with the church and the residents of Cabrini Green—thus creating a welcome and open gate to both communities.

- † Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” When he speaks these beautiful words of assurance, he’s not just talking to some of us, but to all of us, and to those who haven’t yet heard his voice. It’s our task to speak it, this body of Christ, with love and invitation in his name.
- † We as a church have a reputation for embodying an open gate for all—thank you.
- † And may it continue to be so. Amen.

Sources:

Richard Florida, “The Geography of Hate,” <http://www.theatlantic.com>

Dana Ferguson, “The Gate and the Keeper,” <http://fourthchurch.org>