

sermon-4/13/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“The Gate to Abundant Life”
John 10:1-10

Doors or gates are an interesting metaphor. I read recently how businesses use doors as a way to express to customers how they want to be perceived. You may not have noticed, but banks, a few years back, changed their front doors. In the article I read it said this change “was a signal of a fundamental shift in the business of banking. In the early days of the last century. . .banks were built to look like impregnable fortresses.” Their front doors were solid helping people feel secure about their money being protected.

“Then, in the mid-20th century, banks became more ‘user friendly.’ They attempted to attract customers, to put a warm and friendly face on banking. Gone were the big, thick, impenetrable doors and glass doors were installed.” Now you could look in and see what was going on inside. Banks became welcoming and accessible.

Doors or gates tell us a lot about the building behind that door or gate. Still, when Jesus uses the metaphor of being the gate to the sheepfold, it is a complicated, and potentially troubling metaphor. As one commentator noted, doors can be seen as a kind of prison, holding people in. On the other extreme, doors can be seen as keeping others out, as a means of exclusion. Some have seen the Church of Jesus Christ in both those negative ways. Some have felt trapped by guilt or by very strict rules making their religion like a prison. Others have seen the Church as excluding others or being judgmental to those who don’t call themselves Christian.

I don’t think Jesus had either of those extremes in mind when he called himself the gate to the sheepfold. The image here is a gate that swings in and out. The sheep have the freedom to come and go as they please or have need. Jesus, as the gate, is, at least partly, an image of freedom.

When you think about who Jesus invited through the gate to the Kingdom of God, it becomes clear this is an odd gate to be sure. As one preacher notes, this gate seems to keep out those one would think were insiders. He is referring to the chief priests and the Pharisees who thought they were part of the in group. They thought they were the ones to do the excluding, keeping out the ritually unclean from the Temple.

And, Jesus as the gate seems to let in those the good religious folks thought should be excluded like the Samaritan, the woman caught in adultery, and all those poor peasants and fishermen who were not welcome in the homes of the rich or in their Temple.

My guess would be we exclude ourselves from going through the gate that is Jesus when we don’t see that gate leading us to a world where all are valued. We exclude ourselves from entering the gate that is Jesus when we don’t trust his voice to be the voice of God. We read later in chapter ten that some thought Jesus was just plain nuts. They would not even want to enter that gate.

But, when we see Jesus as the gate to abundant life, we can't help ourselves. We want to enter. Interestingly, the word translated "life" in verse ten is not talking about physical life. It is referring to our spiritual life. Those who enter the gate that is Jesus find their inner life renewed and rich.

This abundant life mentioned here is meant to remind us of all those passages in both the New and Old Testaments where God's abundance is celebrated. The Bible is littered with these stories of abundance from the manna in the desert during the Exodus; to Jesus turning water into a ridiculous amount of wine at the wedding feast; to the feeding of the 5,000 with very little to begin with, and then having so much left over it took many baskets to hold it; to the huge catch of fish the disciples caught when Jesus enters their boat; to the extravagance of the Father to the prodigal son when he returns home, it just goes on and on and on. Abundance is part of the fabric of life for the people of God.

The life we find with God is an abundant, rich inner life. We call this life "eternal life." It is, as scholars tell us, participation in God's life. It is a quality of life that is deeper than surface realities, more lasting than monetary wealth, and leads to joy rather than the kind of happiness that is dependent on outward circumstances.

The other metaphor this chapter of John presents to us is Jesus as the shepherd, the Good Shepherd. Jesus says there are good shepherds and bad shepherds. By inference, we sense that Jesus is saying the religious leaders, his audience in these sayings, are the bad shepherds. They fleece the people, take advantage of widows and the poor, and keep many away from the Temple because of their purity laws.

One commentator I read said the distinction being drawn here reminded him of the movie *Babe*. Perhaps you have seen it. In the movie, Babe, a pig, wants to be a sheepdog and ends up becoming a prize-winning "sheepdog."

The commentator writes, "Babe shepherds the sheep not by biting or intimidating them, but by treating them with kindness. In contrast to the dogs who use domination and ferocity to make the sheep do their will, Babe speaks to the sheep with respect: 'If you would be so kind, would the three ladies with collars on please stand outside the pen?' The sheep oblige the little guy. They hear his voice and they follow him. The dogs, who think the world runs only on intimidation and violence, are shocked. . ."

(Added Sunday morning after I wrote this sermon: After hearing the Dalai Lama speak yesterday, I think he would have loved the movie *Babe*. He spoke about the need to solve the world's problems with compassion, kindness, and the need to disarm.)

The world always thinks to be strong, one must use violence or intimidation. Surprisingly, even some of the world's tyrants saw beyond that strategy. We are told that Emperor Tiberius rebuked one of his provincial governors for taxing the people too high. He said the part of a good shepherd is "to shear his flock, not skin it."

Jesus as the gate, Jesus as the Good Shepherd, are metaphors to help us see clearly the character of God. Jesus is a window into the heart of God. The God we know in Jesus is the one who brings us abundant life.

The trick is learning how to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd. Jesus says those who commit themselves as his disciples become part of his flock. They will hear his voice and follow. They will be able to discern his voice among all the other voices clamoring for their attention.

In John, chapter nine, it was all about seeing. The blind man is healed allowing him to see clearly. Thus, he was able to call Jesus Lord. Now it is all about hearing. When we truly commit ourselves to Jesus we will hear his voice and follow.

I suspect if we are not hearing the voice of Jesus we might want to ask ourselves why? Maybe we don't spend enough time in the community of believers helping us tune our ears to that voice as it comes to us in the voices of others, even those in this church. Maybe we have not truly committed ourselves to be his disciple. Those who make only a casual commitment to be a disciple of Jesus don't always hear very well.

This is not to judge those who can't hear. Heaven help us, we don't need another voice of judgment in our heads. Many of us are already too hard on ourselves as it is. It is, however, to say that if you are not experiencing the abundant interior life promised in this passage, perhaps you might want to ask yourself which voice are you listening to, which activities get your best energies?

Jesus is the gate to abundant life and true freedom. If you haven't entered that gate in an intentional way, I invite you to give it a chance. Amen