

“Gated Community” GPPC 5-7-17
Psalm 23, John 10:1-10

Several years ago, Beth and I spent a few days with her mom and dad in a retirement community in Florida, about an hour south of Orlando. Now Beth’s folks live near Pittsburgh. But they used to go Florida for a few months each year as break from the dreary and sometimes ferocious western Pennsylvania winters.

The place in Florida was modest and wonderful. Well-maintained condos faced a private pond shaded by palm trees and stocked with fish. There were no alligators—at least that we observed. A paved walk went all the way around the pond; I guess it was about a mile. So you could walk or run or fish or just get to your neighbors with ease. There were tennis courts, a swimming pool, a clubhouse, and lots of activities for the residents who had to be old enough for an AARP card to buy a place. My in-laws made dear friends during their winters there.

And the whole place was gated. You couldn’t just waltz in. You had to know the security code or be somebody’s guest to get in. But once you were inside there was a sense not only of community but of

Jeff Paschal

calm and safety from the turbulent and sometimes dangerous outside world.

Of course, when we say the words “gated community” that conjures up other images too, doesn’t it? Maybe we think “*exclusive gated community.*” We imagine people being kept out. Is gated community something to celebrate or something to mourn or is it ambiguous?

In the 10th chapter of John’s gospel Jesus talks about a gated community. How do we understand this community he describes?

It’s helpful to remember the context for Jesus’ words. A few weeks ago, we read the ninth chapter of John’s gospel, the story of the man born blind. In that story, on the Sabbath day Jesus heals the man born blind. But instead of rejoicing, the Pharisees, religious leaders of the day, launch a multi-level investigation and end up dismissing Jesus and expelling the formerly blind man from the synagogue. The chapter ends with Jesus confronting these Pharisees and their own blindness.

Then immediately following is this morning’s reading, chapter ten, with Jesus speaking in metaphors, He says, “Anybody who doesn’t enter

Jeff Paschal

the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit.”

So what’s a sheepfold? Literally, it’s an enclosed place for sheep, open to the sky, often surrounded by buildings, and sometimes walls with briars on top. Metaphorically, it’s something we’ll address in a moment. Who are the sheep? Well, sheep are sheep, but according to the 23rd Psalm, God’s people are the sheep, and Jesus is going to say even more about that. Who are these thieves and bandits who sneak in by another way? We don’t know for sure, but originally Jesus may have had some grumpy, legalistic Pharisees of his time in mind.

But what about our time? Who are the thieves and bandits we face? That’s a harder question.

We know that the thieves and bandits Jesus talks about steal. What do they steal? Money? No. Sheep. Yes, but sheep is a metaphor for people. So what do they actually steal? They steal life. Instead of bringing life, the thieves and bandits of our age, and every age, steal life. Do you know what I mean?

Jeff Paschal

In one of novelist Walker Percy's books, a character lists all the opportunities he has passed up in his life and he says, "I made straight A's but flunked ordinary living." (Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*, 85.)

The thieves and bandits come and take away our zest for life. We lose our gusto. We stop taking risks and we live tentatively, with self-preservation front and center. We quit speaking the truth in love, because, heaven forbid, the truth might offend somebody. We no longer have a greater sense of our God-given purpose in the world. We're just counting time until we die. As T.S. Eliot said, "I have measured out my life in coffee spoons."

Jo and I attended a workshop on social media and mental health the other day, and we were reminded of how addictive smartphones and computers are for all ages, but especially for younger people. How much time is wasted staring at a screen instead of staring into the eyes of a friend or a family member or partner?

Who or what are the thieves and bandits in your life and mine? Are they addictions we need to address with twelve-step groups, counseling, Bible, and prayer? Are they the thieves of worry? The bandits of

Jeff Paschal

inappropriate anger and revenge? Who or what is stealing life away from you and me and keeping us from being the most generous, purposeful, funny, and glad people we're meant to be?

Jesus keeps talking. And he (or John who writes these words) mixes metaphors. Jesus is the shepherd for the sheep and he is also the gate. Look at both images, one at a time.

Jesus says the gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd. "And," says Jesus, "the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

Shepherds of sheep actually name their sheep, like you or I might name a dog or cat. Can you imagine it? The sheep are all in the sheepfold milling around. "Bah! Bah!" And once the gate is opened, the shepherd calls. "Come on, Zoe. That a girl." "Come on, Bob. That a boy." "Come on, [insert your name here]." And unlike cattle, which are

Jeff Paschal

driven, sheep are led. The shepherd goes ahead calling them by name and they follow. The image is beautiful and tender, isn't it?

But it's also instructive. If we are the sheep (and we are) and Jesus is the shepherd (which he is), notice how this affects our lives.

For example, we all have those days when we feel down. We think we aren't worth much; we're failures. Maybe we feel anonymous in a big world. We are people who are born and die and what difference did our lives make anyway?

But Jesus is the Good Shepherd and he knows each one of us by name. We are precious. Whether we are known by a bunch of people or just a few doesn't matter; what matters is that we are well-known by God. We matter. Each one of us.

And we also learn how to respond to the shepherd. Jesus says "the sheep follow [the shepherd] because they know his voice." But how did the sheep come to know the shepherd's voice? They had to learn, didn't they? It took time, didn't it? The baby sheep saw what the mama and daddy sheep did. They saw the mama and daddy sheep following the shepherd, over and over, again and again, and by repetition they also

Jeff Paschal

learned to follow along. It wasn't magic. It wasn't just good intentions. It took effort. It was the example of the mother and the father sheep following the shepherd.

Imagine the sheepfold as a metaphor for the church. We gather in the church, and we learn to follow the shepherd. And we teach the little ones to follow the shepherd, to recognize that voice.

But someone has said that each of us receives about 6000 messages a day. 6000. And we have to sort through those messages. Which ones are important and which are trivial? Which are true and which are lies? Which are destructive and which build up? Which create a more vibrant country and world, and which bring death, hatred, and despair? In the sheepfold of the church, we learn to discern and to recognize the voice of the shepherd and that's what our children learn by repetition.

And Jesus also says, "I am the gate for the sheep...Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

What is Jesus claiming here? He's claiming more than the gift of life after this life, as impressive and comforting as that is. He is also claiming a different quality of life right now. When the sheep listen to the shepherd's voice then they begin to experience salvation right now.

Going back to its Hebrew roots, the word that means to be saved means spaciousness, being given room, being supplied with space. And that makes sense because when we think about the nature of sin, sin always tricks us. It promises something exciting, but inevitably it narrows our world, constricts and enslaves us. So just before God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, God reminds Moses that Israel used to be a slave in Egypt. Why the reminder? I think it's God's way of saying, "You were slaves before. Then I freed you. So don't enslave yourself again. Keep the commandments."

The sheep are given room to come in and go out and find pasture. When they listen they are given room to come in and go out find food, a pattern of life that will sustain them. They will have life in abundance, or we can translate it as superfluous life, unnecessary life, life that's better

Jeff Paschal

than just putting in our time. Life that's superior to just making a living or just dragging through our days.

That's what offered to you and me and all the world. The church is a gated community for safety and rest, but also for the formation, feeding, and nurture of all who would follow the Good Shepherd. It's a gated community for the sheep the Shepherd knows and calls by name. But Jesus is the Shepherd and the gate. So the gate is always open. And the Shepherd is always calling. "Come and follow me. Come and follow me. And know life in all its abundance, life overflowing. Come." Amen.

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