First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

4/30/23

Gate Keeping

John 10:1-10

**10**“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. **2**The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3**The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4**When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5**They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” **6**Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. **7**So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8**All who came before me[a] are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. **9**I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. **10**The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

My very first week in Soda Springs coincided with the celebration of the 4th of July. I was excited to experience how the town celebrated Independence Day, and I remember asking my sister what to expect. Well, she said, you know, the usual. Floats, marching bands, drill teams, an honor guard; all that stuff. Then she went on to tell me to make sure that I brought a big bag so I could get my share of candy. Well, since I love candy, that got my attention. My sister explained that every entry in the parade included someone throwing out candy to the bystanders. Huh, I thought to myself, that’s rather extravagant; and to be honest, it was. I’ll admit that I’m glad my sis mentioned bringing a bag, because I went home that day with quite the haul.

John’s gospel is, arguably, the most complex of the 4 synoptic gospels, as the writer tosses metaphors around in a very extravagant way, much like participants toss candy at a parade. This can make it challenging to discern the actual meaning of John’s words and, at the same time, it can create an opportunity for us to look for deeper meaning in these passages and discover new ways to understand Jesus’ teachings.

In today’s reading, John uses three metaphors to describe Jesus; The Gate, the Gate Keeper, and the Shepard. Much of the commentary around these 10 short verses focuses on the imagery of Jesus as the Shepard, the Good Shepard as we have come to refer to him as, and this metaphor has captured the imagination of Christians for centuries. Artwork like the picture of Jesus with the flock of sheep, a copy of which hangs in our Fellowship Hall, is commonly found in churches and homes all over the world. Hymns, like our opening hymn this morning, have become beloved favorites and, along with the artwork, provide a real sense of comfort in the knowledge that Jesus is indeed watching out for us and protecting us, just as a Shepard does for their flock.

Other commentaries focus on Jesus as the gate. The imagery of Jesus, as the gate, might be understood, in a traditional interpretation, to mean that no one can be saved unless they enter the fold through a belief in Jesus. Or, as verse 9 puts it, ***9****I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.*

A similar argument can be made for how we interpret the idea of Jesus as the Gate Keeper. Verse 3 tells us, ***3****The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.* Again*, a* very traditional view of this passage and one I don’t disagree with.

The overarching theme, in this entire passage, is found in verse 10, which reads, ***10****The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”*

John makes it clear that the thief who comes only to steal and kill and destroy, is an outside threat to the flock Jesus has gathered. But what happens when the threat isn’t an external one? What happens when the threat comes from inside the flock?

I saw a post on Facebook yesterday, purporting to show a new church member handbook. This new church member handbook listed 84 (yes, 84) do’s and don’ts if one wanted to affiliate with this particular congregation. Now, the post was tongue in cheek and meant to be humorous, and some of the items listed caused me to chuckle. Such as, don’t look at others while singing, it will distract Jane, or don’t go to the movies, unless it’s a movie approved by Jane, or don’t sit in Jane’s pew. The reason I chuckled over this list is because I’ve seen examples of just this type of gate keeping, perhaps not quite as extreme as some of the items on this list, but close enough that I could relate, and I imagine that many of you can relate to this as well. While this type of gate keeping can be mildly annoying, or even humorous at times, there’s a larger issue at stake here. Who, exactly, IS the gate keeper? Obviously, Jane thinks she’s been assigned that job, but here’s the thing, Jesus makes it very clear that he is the Gate Keeper, not Jane and not us. What could possibly give us the idea that we know better than Jesus, on this matter?

A few years back, the United Church of Christ launched a video, as part of a national ad campaign, depicting a Sunday service. The congregation in this video was well dressed and well behaved. They were, as my mother would put it, all in their places with bright shiny faces. There was a catch, though. In this video, there were two very muscular men standing at the entrance to the church and they were bouncers, equipped with a catapult under the front porch. An African American couple attempts to come into the church and the bouncers tell them that they’re in the wrong place, good bye. Bam! They’re catapulted away. Same thing with a same sex couple, nope you don’t belong here, you have to leave. Bam! They’re catapulted away. Same thing with a homeless man, nope you’re not dressed right, and you smell, go away. Bam! He’s catapulted away, too. Y’all get where this is going, right?

The fact of the matter is that our attempts at gate keeping; our desire to separate folks into “us versus them,” creates a situation where we become the thieves Jesus warns about, stealing from others the light, the joy, and the freedom that the gospel of our risen Savior offers us.

Unfortunately, as we are all aware, gate keeping is rampant in the Christian Church today. We don’t have look very far at all to see glaring examples. Women preachers? Oh no, that’s not Biblical! Interracial marriage? Good heavens, no! That’s not what God ordains! Same gender marriage? Not if I have anything to say about it, you heretic!

I’ve witnessed first-hand the devastation that gate keeping causes. I’ve seen so many smart, capable, faithful people rejected by the institutional church who choose never to return. People who have lost their faith, not just in a particular denomination, but in Christianity, as a whole. And, for a time, I was one of them.

After the faith community I grew up in rejected me, I lost my way. I felt that God had turned God’s back on me. So, my stubborn Irish self basically said, OK, church, OK God, you don’t want me then I don’t want anything to do with you either. It was truly by the grace of God that I made it back. Many of you know my story and I don’t need to recount the details here. What I will say is this: As a result of my own experiences, I will never stop fighting for those who many within the larger church find undesirable. I will never stop challenging those who would put up a fence around the Lord’s table. I will never stop working for the day when the church lives into the gospel it claims to follow.

Bottom line, folks? I believe twisting the teachings of Jesus in such a way so those teachings are used to exclude anyone, instead of including everyone, as Jesus intended, is a sin, plain and simple. Challenging those who have the audacity to assume the role of gate keepers, is hard work, it can be exhausting work, but it’s work that I believe God is calling all of us to do. Won’t you join me? AMEN