

I Am - The Door, Gate

John 10:1-10
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First Presbyterian Church
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Every other week, I have a video clergy visit with an inmate at the Cole County Detention Center in Jefferson City. The last time we met, Jon told me about the door of his cell, which is about 8 feet by 4 feet. "When I first got here," said Jon, "I started putting drawings of crosses and little scripture verses on my door. It's now completely covered top to bottom, side to side. When I'm outside my cell, I leave my door swung open facing the hallway. Other inmates passing by will stop to look and read what's there. And every once and while – it happens a lot – someone will tell me, 'I've been struggling with something that's been bothering me. I just read something on your door that gave me the answer, and I feel better now.'"

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the door..." or in your pew-Bible translation, the "gate." Either way's fine. Jesus is the door, the gate, the passageway to God and all the wisdom and blessings he brings.

In our New Testament lesson, Jesus says, "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." Here, he's talking to the Pharisees after healing the man born blind, giving him the gift of sight, of vision. The Pharisees tried to constrain Jesus and his ability to heal. After all he did it on the Sabbath, and that was against their religious laws.

The Pharisees set themselves up as the gatekeepers for what's right and what's wrong. Who are the gatekeepers in your life? Who do you look to in deciding what's true and what's false? That's an important question.

Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin insist they're right and we're wrong, all the other nations of the world are wrong. And on that basis, he bombs the people of Ukraine. Here in this country, there are all kinds of differing views of what's true and what's false, different sides when it comes to vaccines, climate change, immigration, voter rights, abortion, gun control, and sexual orientation and identity. If you squirmed a bit thinking, "uh oh, the preacher is going to tell me what to think about vaccines, climate change, immigration, voter rights, abortion, gun control, sexual orientation and identity – if the thought of getting challenged on any of those issues has you squirm a bit, well then you know how strongly divided we are as a nation, as people.

We are just as far apart on any of those issues as the Pharisees were with Jesus. When confronted by the Pharisees, the Emperor or anyone else, Jesus always pointed to the source of divine truth, God Almighty. In Jesus' way of thinking about these and all issues, there are four key aspects – what he calls the gate, the gatekeeper, the shepherd, and the thief.

From today's scripture, we know that Jesus sees himself as the gate, the doorway, the threshold between the sheep and the thieves, thieves who "Jesus says come only to steal and kill and destroy."

The Pharisees are the thieves in this scenario. They're the false shepherds from the Old Testament passage Vicky read for us, where God says, "Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ... You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, ... you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them." That's the Pharisees, that's those who misuse their power. And then there's the gatekeeper. Jesus is the gate and God is the gatekeeper. "The gatekeeper," says Jesus, "opens the gate for (the shepherd), and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." "The one who enters by the gate," says Jesus, "is the shepherd of the sheep." In this scenario we are the shepherd. We are the ones who enter the realm of God through Jesus, who is our passageway to God. We're used to thinking of Jesus as the shepherd, which is a good way of looking at it; we'll do that in next week's sermon titled "I AM – The Good Shepherd." But this week, in this scripture, we are the shepherds, Jesus is the gate, and the sheep are all the people around us.

Our job as the shepherds is to steer people toward Jesus, through which they can enter the safety of the sheepfold, the protection and abundance of God's kingdom. Jesus describes the shepherd, -describes you- saying, "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."

Who are the ones following your lead these days? How well are you leading and guiding the people around you – your friends and family, your coworkers and classmates, your church family and those you meet outside of church? And where are you leading them?

People are getting led astray all the time these days. It's terrible. And the ones doing the leading are always convinced they're right, that they're heading in the right direction. Maybe; maybe not. We get so concerned, so adamant about where society is heading these days that we forget to look at things through the eyes of Jesus. It's more important than ever to view things through the eyes and heart of Jesus – Jesus who healed the sick even on the Sabbath, fed the hungry even when there were too many to count, welcomed the lost even when they were sinners, and stood up to the self-righteous, the self-centered even when they were rich and powerful.

That's how we measure our effectiveness as shepherds, as those whom God is counting on to guide others along the way. Are we guiding them toward Jesus and his way, or are we trying to get them to go our way, convinced that we know best.

In his book titled “Making Room for Life,” Randy Frazee tells the story of a true Christian shepherd from his life. “I grew up in an unchurched home,” said Frazee. “When I became a Christian ... at ... age ... 14, I had to make arrangements to get to church and back home by myself. ... There was one particularly gracious Italian family that invited me to their house almost every Sunday for a great meal.... The father was a successful (business owner)..., and he would ‘say grace.’ This was a new experience for me,” said Frazee. “This successful man would bow his head and humbly thank God for providing the food we were about to eat. I had never heard of such a thing. It seemed to me that he had worked very hard to get to where he was and that he should take all the credit. However, he humbled himself in the presence of his family and declared his gratitude to God. There were times when everyone else’s head was bowed and eyes were closed, and I’d look up and stare at him. I desperately wanted to grow up and be like him. I wanted to raise a family and demonstrate God’s love and protection for our family, just as this father did. Well,” said Frazee, “I’ve been married to his beautiful daughter now for over 20 years, and I see it as a great honor each night to say grace to God on behalf of my family of six.”¹

We have no idea what impact we have on others. But I can tell you, the gracious, Christlike things that you say and do around other people make a difference. “The sheep follow (the shepherd),” says Jesus, “because they know his voice.” Whose voice do people hear coming from your mouth – the voice of Jesus or some contrary voice bent on having things his or her way, just as he or she sees it?

Jesus may be the Good Shepherd, and he is, but you, also, are a shepherd, a shepherd of his flock. Be the voice of Jesus to those around you. Lead them toward the comfort and care of Jesus, and through Jesus, bring them to the power and promise of God. Amen.

¹ Randy Frazee, *Making Room for Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 134.

PASTORAL PRAYER

We enter into the stillness of prayer and gaze at the days stretching before us, leading us to the glory and hope and promise of new life on Easter Sunday.

As the days stretch toward Easter, let us give of our time to those in need of an encouraging visit or to a child in need of engaging play. And then, O God, stretch us to give more as we listen to one whose grief wears heavy.

Let us give of ourselves during this time of Lent, and volunteer to serve where our time and talent meets a need in our church or in our community.

And then, O God, stretch us to share our talent with a young person who wants to learn.

Open our eyes to the needs of those who live near to us and those who live across the seas, and then open our hearts to feel the pain of need and do what we can to show Chris's grace and mercy, love and provision. And then, O God, stretch us to do more, to double down on our ministry of care and concern. Stretch us until we feel the twinge of pain which allows us to fully feel the joy of giving.

Such are the tasks of Lent ... stretched out on our own cross so that we might know the joy of new life that Easter promises for us and all people.

We pray your Spirit of new life, of healing, of vitality and strength upon those recovering from surgery, settling into new living situations, and being treated for illness and disease. We pray your Spirit of comfort upon those who grieve. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, drawing near to him in our Lenten Journey toward the cross he embraced and overcame for us, praying as he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.