

May 7, 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Easter, Good Shepherd Sunday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
John 10:1-10, Psalm 23

Shepherds, Gates & Gatekeepers

Have you ever tried to get out of a parking garage and gotten stuck? You drive up to the exit and you stop behind that long, heavy metal bar, that thing that raises and lowers to let cars in and out, and you slide your ticket into the slot, but nothing happens, the bar does not go up. Adding insult to injury, you hear a mechanical voice say, “Please insert your prepaid ticket,” which you have already done! But nothing is happening, the metal arm stays down, the gate is closed, you can go nowhere.

Or have you ever stood outside of a fancy club, in a long line, you are dressed in your finest but you are still not sure you are up to snuff, you peer ahead at a muscular person who is standing near the entrance. You hope that intimidating person will let you in, through the door, but it’s blocked. In this case, the gate that blocks it is not a metal bar, but a velvet rope.

Like this one? I swiped this from the entry to our chapel. Sometimes churches have things like this. As gates go, it can’t hold a candle to the metal bars in parking garages, it’s not even close to that kind of barricade. It doesn’t require a special code; you could easily climb over it, or under it. Or just unhook it. Now, I don’t think this velvet rope keeps people out of our chapel (especially because I’m holding it right now), but I do think that there are things—call them invisible velvet ropes—that keep people out of church. I’m speaking metaphorically.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is also speaking metaphorically. It’s Good Shepherd Sunday, and so we have sheep and shepherds, in the songs and the readings, including and especially the gospel, but Jesus doesn’t limit himself to just one metaphor. In the gospel, Jesus also talks about gates and gatekeepers—those items and individuals that let sheep in and out. That’s Jesus, the gospel says. Jesus announces that he is the one that lets sheep—lets people—in, and leads them out. “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them,” The gospel says. I think that’s still true. I think it’s all too easy to hear this passage from John 10, and, despite its pastoral tone, have a picture of Jesus with arms crossed in evaluation and disapproval, someone who admits only a select few. Jesus as bouncer. Of course, the word “bouncer” does not appear in the Bible, but I’m not sure “gatekeeper” is much more positive. Instead, I think it can sound like someone who is intent on keeping people out.

But that’s not what Jesus does, not according to the gospel as a whole, in which Jesus does the very opposite of keeping people out. This becomes especially clear when you look at this particular gospel reading in context. Johannine scholar and preaching teacher Karoline Lewis is adamant about this point. To really understand Jesus as good shepherd and gatekeeper, Lewis says, you have to read not just John 10, but the entire chapter before it.

We did this, actually, just a few weeks ago. We read all of John chapter 9, it was one of those very long gospel readings that we had this past Lent. Interestingly enough, on the Sunday in Lent that we heard John 9, we also had Psalm 23. On that Lenten Sunday, the connection to the beloved Psalm 23 was its verse, “You anoint my head with oil.” There’s a connection there with John 9, because in John 9 a man is anointed, the man’s eyes are anointed, with spit and mud. John 9 is the healing of the man born blind; Jesus restores his sight. But then no one wants anything to do with the man: his neighbors, the religious leaders, even the man’s parents, and in the end they expel the man from the community. But Jesus finds him. Like the shepherd who

leaves the ninety-nine to go out and find the one, Jesus finds the man who had been born blind. And then Jesus tells the others that they were the ones who were blind. End of chapter 9—but not end of what Jesus says. Jesus keeps talking, right through to the beginning of chapter 10, what we just said, “You are blind Jesus says,” and continues “Very truly I tell you...” Breaking the gospel up as we do, by chapter, by Sundays, masks an important point: Jesus the good shepherd is a commentary on healing. Jesus the gatekeeper lifts up lids of blindness, opens gates of sight. Jesus the gate welcomes a man whom everyone has rejected. That’s what, that’s who, Jesus is: one who opens things up, heals, restores, frees.

Jesus is the attendant at the parking garage, the garage where your car was stuck, where your patience was fried, where you encountered an automated voice that was no help at all. But then you saw a button that said press for assistance, and you do. And you hear—not a recording, but a real person. You know that voice. You know that voice like sheep know the shepherd’s. When you are stuck in a parking garage and you hear a real live voice coming out of a speaker, you know that’s the voice of Jesus. And then, that person, the parking attendant, comes down to help you, in person, just like God did for us, in Jesus. The parking attendant comes to your car door. You see the tag on his shirt, his name is Jesús. You are an irate mess but he is patient and kind. He is love incarnate. He takes a look at you and what you’ve been trying to do, how you’ve been trying to pay, and he says, “Oh, I see the problem. Your credit card is expired. You don’t have another one? You don’t have cash? It’s okay. I’ll take care of it.” And he pays for you, and the bar lifts, and you are free. That’s the kind of gatekeeper Jesus is.

And he’s also the kind that you’ll find at the fanciest possible club, the place to be, the party of the century, the party of eternity. You’ll see him there, but not in the bouncer at the door, he’s the host of this party. He’s the host who leaves the celebration to see who is outside. It’s a long, long line that you are in, with all these other people, all wondering why you thought for a minute that you could be part of this, why you thought you could be at a place like that, it’s all too clear you’ll never get in. And then the host says, “I have VIP tickets for all of you.”

That’s the kind of gatekeeper Jesus is, and not just the gatekeeper, the gate, the very means by which we enter into relationship with God.

Somehow, sometimes, even in church, we miss that. We have velvet ropes. But you know what? We can unhook them. We can ask ourselves, what barriers have we installed? Who can come in? How do you have to look? What do you have to pay?

The gospel says that not a one of us earned it, deserve it, could pay for it, we are all given it, invited to follow where he leads, to green pastures, beside still waters, to life abundant.