

Good Shepherd Sunday May 3, 2020 Rev. Judith Arnold

John 10:1-10

Today, the fourth Sunday of Eastertide, is always good shepherd Sunday. Sheep and shepherds are used a lot to describe our relationship with Jesus, and Jesus' desire for us. As comforting as that sounds, and is, this passage with the Gate, brings up a familiar question..

It makes me wonder if I would be allowed in through the gate or not. Jesus tells us that it is thieves and bandits who try to enter another way, to climb over the fence or dig under it, maybe to break down the fence altogether. What would have happened if a thief or bandit came to the gate? I wonder..

I can imagine not wanting to go in by the Gate, this gate where Jesus is the doorman. I can imagine wanting to be in with the sheep but not being sure I was worthy, being afraid of being turned away, being afraid that Jesus would somehow ferret out the thief lurking somewhere inside me, find me unworthy. This scenario popped into my head a few years ago and it returns from time to time. I am at the pearly gates. A huge group of people are waiting to get in – through the gates. The line is moving slowly but everyone gets in after a conversation with St. Peter. But there is quite a bottleneck. I linger at the back of the crowd, letting people in front of me as they come. I am so reluctant to push myself forward that I never make it there. I am destined to remain forever outside. This scenario came to me not as testament of my humility but as a tableau of how shame and fear operate inside me and what the consequences of giving them free rein are - keeping me out of heaven, away from God and Jesus.

The shame of wanting in, the shame of wanting something you don't have, the shame of needing something you don't have - Shame! And along with shame comes fear of exposure – “everyone will see I am in need” – and the fear that they will all slightly nod their heads in recognition – having known, having seen the truth of who you really are more clearly than you can see yourself.

Shame and exposure are inextricably linked – studies of children as young as two left with caregivers while their mothers went off to a war plant showed that when the mother returned they would refuse to look her in the face; this separation having been misinterpreted as abandonment. Adults are no different – it's just that we misinterpret other things, attach meaning where there is none, or miss meaning where it was offered. Criticism sticks like Velcro and compliments or success just slide right off. Having another see us being criticized is excruciating; so much so that we pull in, look down wanting to disappear.

Wanting, needing, asking are very vulnerable states. The notion of voicing them in public, asking to be let in by the gate, can be terrifying. The fear that we might be turned away looms large. Just allowing the need or desire to be conscious in our own minds is enough to send us scurrying to the back of the pen, wire clippers in hand.

Jesus says that it is thieves and bandits who are back there trying to get in surreptitiously. You know you are not a thief, a bandit. But you wonder, am I? We don't know our worth when we are in need. We might be as bad as a thief. We might be a loser, we might deserve this misfortune. Being in the position of giving, of helping, of welcoming others in – we know what that says about us. The person in that role is a good person, a worthy person, someone who belongs. But what about when we are the one who needs the door opened, who must have help finding a seat? What about the person who thinks they have nothing to offer; who came hungry, hoping to be fed? What does that say about us then? We belong in the back with the thieves.

When we are feeling ashamed we cannot see ourselves clearly. We do not know if we belong with the bandits or not. We might be turned away. Maybe everyone can see our unworthiness. It is not only concrete needs or wants that we want to hide from the world. Ask anyone who's ever been clinically depressed. The need of healing is so palpable and the possibility of it seems so faint that the only thing one can feel is shame.

Shame blinds us to ourselves and to the compassion of others. But there is someone who sees us better than we can see ourselves. Someone who is telling you, telling us, that the door, the

gate you've thought was supposed to keep you out, is actually there to let you in. Jesus isn't saying bandits and thieves, please enter through the back. He is saying that coming to him with whatever you need, with whoever you are, coming to him at the gate, you will be let in. When you take the risk of asking to be let in, when you let Jesus and yourself know that you need him, Jesus responds. And it is in that moment of connection, it is then that we hear Jesus' voice and know that we belong.

Jesus tells us what awaits us through the gate - I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. Here is what abundance includes. There are green pastures, cool waters, banquets, soothing oils. And there is the valley of the shadow of death. Abundance includes the valleys, assumes the valleys. And it assumes the company and steadying hand, the guiding staff of a shepherd to walk through the valleys with us. It is in our society that we have come to think we need to kick those valleys under the bed.

A full life contains both valleys and mountains - read a few of the psalms and you'll see that complaint and sorrow are the backbone of our communication with God. During one of the hardest times in my life, my partner had dumped me - imagine that, I was devastated, I felt wronged. I read from the book of Lamentations every night. I must have read it through 10 or 11 times. The emotions expressed in it so matched my own that it lifted me up; others have been through rejection, I was not alone. It allowed me to wail and shake my fist - and it also allowed me to ask for the help I needed. My best friend dragged me around with her everywhere she went for about a month.

There is no doubt that everyone in this congregation is generous, compassionate and helpful. There is no doubt that our creative energy goes into high gear when we hear of a problem, a need. I know that first hand. And, there is no doubt there are valleys ahead - perhaps a few we won't even acknowledge until we're deep in them. AND, there is no doubt that some, maybe many, of us will find ourselves in need of one kind or another.

Here's where the doubt comes in. When we are in need, in trouble, will we have the courage to ask for help? Can we risk opening ourselves to another? Can we accept help that is offered, can we ask for help before it is offered? Can we remember the desire Jesus

has for us? I came so that they may have life and have it abundantly. Can we remember Jesus' promise for us? He calls his own sheep by name and they follow him.