

SERMON Pastor Cris Frigm

Gatekeeping is a dangerous business.

Like any of the readings we have on a Sunday morning, the setting for what is happening matters. You may recall, back in Lent, we heard the story of the man born blind, the one that Jesus healed by sending him to wash in the pool of Siloam. We watched a video of that reading so that we were immersed in this story of healing that led to a major uproar for the Jewish authorities. They refused to believe that Jesus could have done what was being reported and the man who was born blind but could now see was cast out of the synagogue.

The community was more concerned about holding onto the gate they had closed to a sinner than they were willing to let their experience of God be changed to fit what was happening right in front of them. You may recall that the video ended rather abruptly because as soon as Jesus finished claiming the man who could see as a disciple, the authorities showed up and wanted to start the argument all over again.

Jesus' response to their gatekeeping argument was to tell this parable – this extended metaphor, or “figure of speech” as John names it.

As I've often said when it comes to imagery based on sheep and shepherds, we are at a distinct disadvantage because most of us – maybe not all of us, but I'd wager the vast majority of us – do not have a lot of experience with herd animals. My experience with sheep is watching for the lambs in spring as I drive past the farms. Academically, I understand a little about what it means to care for a herd animal, but I've never done it. I've figuratively herded cats, and I think I get what it feels like to be a shepherd sometimes when no one wants to listen, but that's not the same thing as what Jesus is describing in such vivid detail.

Jesus uses this disagreement with the Jewish leaders to develop a detailed metaphor in which he moves from suggesting he's the gatekeeper... to the gate... to the good shepherd. It builds on the experience of the covenant people of Israel who had a longstanding connection to shepherding and sheep. David was the shepherd king and the nomadic history of the Ancient Near East had its roots in herding. It's a safe bet that many who first heard these words had first-hand experience.

Protecting sheep from predators was a dangerous profession. The shepherd spent time with the sheep so that they would know their voice because they had to know how to

stay safe and protected. The gate on the sheepfold had the life-giving task of keeping the predators out and giving a safe place for the sheep to be safe and nourished.

But it's not just about sheep, or we wouldn't care so much about what Jesus was saying. Gatekeeping has become a part of communal life. Gatekeeping that maybe used to be about protection and nourishment has become about division and identity. I'm reminded of the cartoon drawn by Pastor David Hayward, who goes by the pseudonym, "The Naked Pastor." I'm thankful that Pastor Christine had it here for the Adult Forum as it reminded me of an important truth as we hear this passage about gatekeeping.

Pastor Hayward created this cartoon of a bunch of people drawing lines to divide the world up into nice, neat squares. I get it; we want order in our lives, so it makes sense to try to organize everything and everyone. But the lines we draw aren't about protection for our neighbors. They're not lines that connect people together to be protected and nourished; they are lines of division. The lines we draw are a gate we place between ourselves and the world so that we can keep "them" out.

At the center of the drawing is Jesus with the pencil turned upside down as he **erases** the lines we draw.

Hold these two images in tension for a moment. A cartoon that suggests that we should stop drawing lines of division – and that Jesus actively erases those lines – with the image of the Messiah as gatekeeper/gate/good shepherd. They might seem to conflict, but I don't think they do. I think we have to be very careful and intentional with how we interpret the "gate" and its purpose.

Jesus was criticizing a community that refused one of its own simply because they wanted to hold onto what they **thought** was true. He accuses them of being blind to what God was doing. Their gate was entirely about excluding people they didn't want. Jesus then describes what God is doing. The shepherd actively and intentionally creates a sheepfold for all of us – for the world that Jesus says God loves. It's a sheepfold where the world is nourished. It's behind a gate that protects the world from the thieves and bandits who would take us away from God.

And we're not the gatekeeper.

This passage, and other passages from John have been used to darken the lines we draw between us and the world – to make them into walls of hate. But that's what we do, that's not what God does. The world takes the image of the gate and gatekeeper and reinforces that God hates the same people we hate. Monstrous acts of violence have been

done in the name of God against “those people” who might only be slightly different. And if they’re **very** different...black, brown, indigenous, gay, female, or anything else that doesn’t fit the white male stereotype of power...then the world will build the gate as high as possible to keep them out.

But that’s not God’s gate. That’s not the work of the good shepherd.

We’ve seen what God does today as we’ve celebrated God’s claim on Vanessa. We’ve witnessed that God gathers all of us together so that we can experience the love shown on the cross and offers us life. We’ve been claimed to live a life filled with gracious love – a love that should work to put an end to violence, a love that should be offered to everyone no matter the color of their skin, the gender or sexuality they claim, or the land of their birth.

Imagine a world where we let God draw the lines of the sheepfold. Imagine a world where we stopped trying to shout our bluster to the world but simply listened to the voice of the shepherd who loves us – a love that was meant for all of us to experience in every fiber of our being.

John says it quite simply: “Jesus used this figure of speech with them,” ...”them” being the religious authorities who closed a gate... “but they did not understand what he was saying to them.” Two thousand years later, we’re still trying to understand what he was saying. But even as we fail, we’re reminded once again in the Word, at the font, and at the table of what Jesus also said so simply..that God came so that we may have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God. Amen.