

Message: "Gatekeeping 101" - 4-26-26

Scripture: John 10:1-10

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

Before we dive into this scripture, I need to get something off my chest - and it's that sometimes, maybe several times, I kind of, sort of wish Jesus would stop saying so much. Or saying certain things. Or saying anything on a particular subject at all. I know, I know, I'm a pastor, I'm a preacher, and we are supposed to be the ones who hold every single word that Jesus says as precious nuggets of theological gold, to recognize and affirm how they are sacred and pure and wise beyond our understanding - but passages like this one really stretches a preacher's patience; at least it really strains my thought processes and my ability to extract eternal truths from confused analogies. And today we have a doozy; it may not seem so at first, but this parable or analogy or metaphorical use of shepherding imagery has for centuries been misunderstood or misapplied or misused by many a preacher and/or parishioner. We are not alone in our befuddlement, for the eight commentary articles I read this last week that focused on this passage all labeled it somewhat confusing, significantly challenging, and - prepare yourself - dangerous.

It's not hard to see why this passage is confusing - Jesus describes himself as the gate, but then the passage also talks about a gatekeeper function and a shepherd function. The gatekeeper opens the gate for the shepherd, so the gatekeeper is God? And Jesus is the shepherd? So the gatekeeper opens Jesus for Jesus to enter into the sheepfold? And what the heck is a sheepfold? Does it mean herd or grouping? Or is a sheepfold a pen or corral or some other kind of physical confinement? But if it is an area of confinement, why does the shepherd enter the gate to lead the sheep out? Sheep need feeding which implies fields of nourishment for them to eat; but followers of Jesus do not feed off the world, they feed spiritually on Christ, who enters the sheepfold and thus provides the spiritual nourishment they need to go out into the world - so how does that all work? And don't get me started about how all who came before Jesus were

thieves and bandits, or what it means to recognize the voice of Jesus, or how we are saved by entering via Jesus to come in and go out and find pasture (were the prophets of old thieves and bandits? Does the voice of Jesus sound more like Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments, Ted Neeley in Jesus Christ Superstar, or Donald Trump in his spat with the pope? And if Jesus is a gate, what does it mean to enter or exit someplace via a person?)

Am I making too much of all of this?

Yes - which brings me to the dangerous part of this parable, this teaching that comes from Jesus, and the dangerous part is this: we often make too much of too little about Jesus. That is to say, very often in the world of Christianity, we magnify one aspect of Christ at the expense of most of the rest, causing untold amounts of spiritual damage in the process.

My focus here is upon one of the most significant ways Jesus gets misrepresented in the world of Christendom - namely, that part where Jesus says "I am the gate." The function of a gate is pretty obvious - a doorway that swings open or closed to allow traffic to flow into or out of certain spaces - but when you attach theological metaphor to the image, things get dangerous fast. Jesus becomes something Jesus never intended - a gatekeeper to identify and separate out the righteous from the unrighteous, the worthy from the unworthy. Now, is this what Jesus proclaims as his central function as a gate? Not at all - but we humans often make it so. We make it so that we count this passage as one of the strongest defenses for a solely professional faith - that is, Christians often make profession of Jesus Christ as lord and savior the only thing that matters in terms of our standing before God.

Forgive me, but it makes me think of that scene from Monty Python and the Holy Grail, where the band of clumsy knights seeking the cup of Christ find themselves at the bridge of death that passes over the Gorge of Eternal Peril which they must travel over; the bridge is guarded by a keeper who's an ogre-type of man who won't let them pass without answering three questions - "What's your name?" "What's your quest?" and "what's your favorite color?" Except the bridgekeeper keeps changing the last question to things like "What's the capital of Assyria?" or "What's the airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?", which of course catches the knights off guard. Answer wrongly and WHOOSH! The knight is swept to his doom into the Gorge of Eternal Peril.

OK, it's a scene you probably have to see to feel its powerful impact, but the point is, ANSWER WRONG AND BURN IN HELL. Monty Python was poking fun at

this idea, but it is not funny when you consider that much if not the majority of the Christian faith understands righteousness in this manner - but Jesus Christ, son of God, did not. Jesus never said what's most important is to profess your faith in him, but to place your life with his. THERE IS A DIFFERENCE! Jesus never said "worship me" but "follow me." THERE IS A DIFFERENCE. Jesus never said "sing songs to my glory and raise banners to my name;" Jesus said "love each other as I love you." THERE IS A DIFFERENCE. You've heard the phrase "I can't hear what you are saying because your actions are shouting so loudly?" Jesus reflects this understanding - profession alone, trying to have right answers to faith's questions, and trying to sound like we are righteous completely miss the point of the faith Jesus shared - that life and its living would constantly move beyond words or doctrine or creed; that faith is about being active in the love of Christ, receiving and giving as much of that love as we possibly can. It's not about saying the right things, but practicing the right love, the love of Christ in the world—a love that is meant to be universally applied to the world.

A book came out back in 2002 that had an intriguing title and a name-recognizable author - the author was Anne Graham-Lotz, daughter of the famous evangelical preacher and revivalist icon Billy Graham. The title of the book was "Just Give Me Jesus." I have to admit I've not read the entire book, mostly because I have developed an allergy to titles like that; I mean no disrespect at all, but in my experience, such phraseology often indicates simplistic ideas about God or Jesus or faith that are theologically shallow; they do not resonate well with a complicated and mysterious God. Nonetheless, I found the title eye-catching and appealing enough to read some of it, fifteen pages in fact, which, for me, were fifteen pages too many. But it only took fifteen pages for me to realize the title for the book was, in my opinion, incomplete - it should be called "Just Give Me Jesus -- Without the Baggage."

"Just Give Me Jesus Without the Baggage" of his insistence that we love everyone, from family to friend to stranger to enemy. Just give me Jesus without the baggage of healing the sick or visiting those in prison or feeding the hungry. Just give me Jesus without the messiness of addressing traumatic history or systemic injustice or climate change or oppressive prejudice. Just give me a Jesus to deal with my own brokenness, my own sin, my own search for meaning, and my own need for grace, the keyword being "my." Just give me that Jesus, the one who serves my needs, without all that other baggage.

Much of the Christian world these days leaves such baggage behind, not realizing that in the process they are leaving Jesus himself behind. It's not baggage to Jesus; in fact, Jesus makes it clear that such things are at the very heart of God. Such baggage was emphasized by Jesus more than anything else. Such baggage reflects the love of God meant for everyone, those with horribly broken lives just as much as those who pretty much have their act together. Until we understand that the baggage associated with Jesus is actually his main concern, we have no real knowledge of the Son of God or the love of God itself; we create God in our own image; we make the gate into the sheepfold operate according to our standards, to make sure it opens easily for us and those like us, but not so easily for those who are different from us, with whom we'd rather not associate.

Jesus will have none of this, for he is not standing at the gate as a bridgekeeper asking three questions for entry into heaven; he is THE gate providing access to the abundance of God, for living full lives in the here and now; he is THE one who shows us the nature and heart of God, which is in our favor; he's THE shepherd who wants only the best for all the sheep, both those who understand this and follow his lead, and those who continue to be misled by the world. It is a great mistake to believe that God ever gives up on anyone, especially the ones we have given up on a long time ago. But the grace of God is an outrageous thing, a continuous divine motivation to see the world and each one of us redeemed in terms of discovering and receiving the life God offers. The gate remains open even to those who refuse to acknowledge God, even to those who oppose God, the real tragedy always being how they don't realize what they are missing.

So enough of gates or gatekeeping or righteous designations; enough of the efforts to determine for ourselves who stands within the good grace of God and who answered the three questions wrong and are whooshed into the Gorge of Eternal Peril. Enough of us trying to make Jesus into a bridgekeeper when he's actually a bridgebuilder between people made in the image of God. He functions as a gate to show people the way, not to condemn them if they refuse to see, in which case they condemn themselves; God's grace keeps the gate open, always. The whole purpose of Jesus was to help us relate to God and each other through the rhythms of love, and this is full-time work, full-life work. Do not waste time asking who is acceptable to God; understand that all are loved by God; and behave accordingly.

Somewhere on this crowded planet, in a place I have never been before and will never visit in my lifetime, someone I do not know and will never meet has just said a prayer in a language I do not understand as an expression of faith in a religion I do not accept. And yet, the prayer was for me. "Please bless all those who are in need," the stranger prayed, and that includes me. The wonder of faith is not that we all agree, but that we all care, even when we are strangers. So I return the prayer, "Please bless all who are in need. All, please, not some: for they are praying for me as I pray for them."

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