

Brilliant Sunshine, Raining Downⁱ

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Focus text: John 10: 1-15

Let us pray:

Holy God, your greatest commandment is that we love you with all we have, and our neighbors as ourselves. In my speaking, Lord, help me to speak out of love. In our hearing, Lord, help us to hear out of love. So that in my speaking, and in our hearing, we might know, and be changed by, your everlasting love. Amen.

I want to talk today about mixed metaphors. You probably did not come here this morning to talk grammar, and I realize that though you are here, there's nothing I can do to make you listen. After all, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't take the barn out of the horse."

Ah yes, a mixed metaphor. It's a figure of speech, and like irony, it's somewhat difficult to define, but relatively easy to recognize. Despite its elusiveness, it isn't rocket surgery – with some concentration, it can be for us a walk in the cake.ⁱⁱ

A mixed metaphor occurs when you combine two or more images or ideals that are inconsistent with one another. It's an extended comparison that is inconsistent with itself.

- That minister, he isn't the sharpest knife in the deck.
- The quarterback is striking out.
- And so on, and so forth.

I'm interested this morning in what mixed metaphors do.

For one thing, they captivate your attention...something doesn't quite fit, so you can't help to stare, to look. A mixed metaphor is like (and this is a simile!) a small stain on a silk tie, or more positively, the red rose in the weedy garden.

A mixed metaphor is so noisy, you can do nothing but stare at it.

Mixed metaphors stretch boundaries, violate conventions and join worlds that otherwise remain segregated. A quarterback cannot strike any more than a first baseman can block a field goal. But through the mixed metaphor, suddenly, "Play ball" and "are you ready for some football?" are somehow joined together.

And, English teachers may take affront, but I will argue that mixed metaphors can produce great beauty. Nearly every week, our pastor, Larry ends worship with a benediction from the book of Isaiah...

"For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off"

Now we can parse definitions and argue whether "hills bursting into song" and trees "clapping their hands" and "memorial signs that can't be cut off" are truly mixed metaphors, but these now-familiar words certainly violate natural conventions, they broaden our perspectives beyond our fixed ways of looking at the world.

They certainly broaden mine.

To this day, I cannot tell you what a brier is, nor will I ever know why it might be preferable to grow a myrtle.

But in hearing Isaiah's words, I do sense beauty. The beauty of a world that transcends the one I know.

This brings us to Jesus.

"Amen, Amen" Jesus says. "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep...Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

In speaking metaphorically, Jesus reveals that he is the pathway to salvation, the door that leads his sheep in and out of the pastures of safety and nourishment. The gateway to abundant life...it's a wonderful image. He need not elaborate.

But he does.

A mere two sentences later, Jesus upends his metaphor by mixing in another one.

"I am the good shepherd." "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." "I am the good shepherd" he says for the second time, in case we missed it. "I know my own and my own know me." English professors, and Pharisees beware, Jesus has mixed his metaphors.

Very truly, Jesus is a serial metaphor-mixer throughout the gospel of John.

"I am the true vine!" "I am the bread from heaven" "I am the living water" "The way, the truth, the life" "the resurrection and the life".

It can be confusing...

But in mixing his metaphorical self, Jesus proclaims that he is bigger than any one single image of himself, that he is willing to stretch boundaries, violate conventions, and unite images and worlds that would otherwise remain apart.

And he does it all out of great love, the love of a shepherd that lays down his life, the love of a gate through which his sheep may evade the thieves and bandits and find passage into the green pastures of abundant life. Jesus' metaphor mixing produces great beauty.

For it is beautiful good news that our Lord and Savior, can simultaneously be a gate and shepherd. That our suffering servant can be the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings. That he may feed us as the bread of heaven and coil among us as the truest of vines.

Because of his mixed metaphoricality, we who are so different, can find God, experience God, and be loved by God, in so many different ways...from so many different vantage points. Sometimes, we need to know which door to enter to find the life promised us. We need Jesus to be the gate.

Sometimes, we know the way, but we can't find it, and the road is filled with thieves and bandits who would do us harm. We need Jesus to be the good shepherd.

Also, because Jesus can be both shepherd and gate, we too can be joined with those to whom we would otherwise be divided.

- We who know Jesus as the one who died for our sins can hold hands and sing "Hallelujah" with those who know Jesus as the truest prophet of social justice, one who announces good news for the poor, release for the captives, earthly food to the hungry.

- We who seek Jesus because he is so divine can sit in pews with those who seek him because he is so human.
- We who vote Democrat because we love Jesus can do mission and undergo Christian study alongside those who vote Republican for the very same reason.

Because Jesus was a mixed metaphor, we share in his freedom to violate conventions. This is good news as well. It means that we are not bound by the limits that we or others may use to describe us.

It may be said of us at this time that we are a weakened congregation. Indeed, we have lost a great friend and pastor. Karen's death leaves a hole in us that cannot be replaced.

But who cannot also say that we have been strengthened? That in our coming together and sharing tears and laughter and memories -- that we are not stronger, more unified, than we were even two weeks ago?

If Jesus can be the gate and the good shepherd, we can be grievors *and* celebrants! We can be the lost *and* the found. The despondent *and* the hopeful. Mixed metaphors.

Look at Karen herself!

Karen was a mixed metaphor, right? How else would you describe someone journeyed so naturally in the spiritual landscape of totem poles and blue hymn books? Someone who could integrate the smoky spirituality of incense with the rigid motions and counter-motions of Roberts Rules of Order? Someone who could forge friendships and spiritual connections between a self-described shaman and a Clerk of Session?

One of your elders commented to me this week that Karen's God was a big God. Indeed. Karen's God was big. Big enough to be both shepherd and gate. Both Spirit and King. Both Mother and Father. Judge and Bridegroom. Rock and Fortress. Energy, and flow.

The church, the world, needs people who can be that big. People who are willing to violate conventions, stretch the boundaries of who they are in order to weave beauty and to join together that which would otherwise be split apart. To be mixed metaphors.

During this summer's mission trips, our adult leaders and youth advisors did nothing but mix metaphorical brews.

At any given instant, Cameron, Tom, Eleanor, Sarah, Chris or Amey were simultaneously spiritual advisors, mediators, drill sergeants, nurses, navigators, chefs, chief contractors, confidants, friends, photographers, psychologists, dieticians, referees, motivational speakers, travel agents, auto mechanics, alarm-clocks, Slip-and-slide racers, janitors, chaperones, and pharmacists.

Being a youth advisor means having your boundaries stretched, your imaginations opened, being clouded in a sea of roles and responsibilities.

And they see such beauty. They see people being joined together that otherwise would be separated:

- old and young, black and white,
- TC and St Stephens and South Lakes
- "in-crowd" and "out-crowd,"
- athletes and artists
- 6th grade boys, 8th grade girls (just in friendship, mind you).

Good friends, English professors and Pharisees frown upon mixed metaphors. As a church, we must embrace them.

Because in them, we see our Christ, who is our gate, our shepherd, who is our passageway from grief to joy, our good shepherd leading us from dark pain to green pastures.

In having the freedom to become mixed metaphors, we are broadened beyond ourselves, beyond our hardship into God's Lordship, beyond grief into joy, beyond mourning and into celebration.

We are joined together, and we join together with those from whom we have been separated and experience how very good it is when kindred spirits live in unity (Psalm 133:1).

In our big, metaphor-mixing God, we receive our brilliant sunshine, raining down.

May the trees of the field clap their hands. Amen.

ⁱ Attributed to Rush Limbaugh on http://therussler.tripod.com/dtps/mixed_metaphors.html

ⁱⁱ(<http://www.calvin.edu/academic/engl/lang/mixmet.htm>)