

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • AUGUST 18, 2019
“BONDING TO BECOME MORE”

Litany

Based on Psalm 80

Hear us, Good Shepherd, leading us like a flock, enthroned on your highest love!

Restore us in the awareness of your presence.

When tears become our only language,

let us feel your hand upon us.

Let us pray:

**We will never turn away from you, our God;
by faith we will run the race with you in our running! Amen.**

The Scripture

John 10:1-10

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

The Message

A Fuller Life

Nick Larson

Jesus talks about himself as a lot of things in gospels. John gives us lots of them: “I am...the Lamb of God, Light of the world, Lord of all, Lion of Judah.” Those are just the “L” ones.

Jesus refers to himself in two ways in our passage this morning: A shepherd’s voice and the gate. He is, at once, the door and the Good Shepherd, and perhaps the

gatekeeper, too. Yet no matter how long I've contemplated it over the years, this multiplicity used to stump me. Allow me to explain.

I mean we often hear about how the gospel of John has Jesus saying these "I am..." statements, but how often do we stop to think, "I am the gate." I think it is sorely misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Almost every year, a couple of weeks after Easter, Christians hear this passage from John's gospel in which Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd and then says these cryptic things about the bandit shepherds, who are trying to get the sheep to recognize the wrong voice. Most of the time we hear it explained as a story about sinners trying to steal people away from God. Right?

In generations past, sometimes Christians said that bandit shepherds were people or clergy of other faith traditions trying to lead folks away from Christianity. But honestly, we have never needed other religions to worry about people trying to convince each other which voice of Christ is the real one.

For nearly a hundred years, if you were Catholic, Protestants were bandits. If you were Protestants, it was Catholics that you were to turn away from. Yet, I don't think that is getting to the essence of what Jesus was doing here. That interpretation gives too much credit to humanity and religions.

Yet, I think the essence of this passage is speaking of something deeper. Nowhere else, I think, does Jesus express the intention of his mission and ministry more clearly than in this succinct verse at the end of this passage in John. It's a bit of mantra for me. It is one of my personal favorite lines from Jesus, *"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."*

In contrast to all that would rob us of life – the thieves and the bandits – Jesus came to give life, and not just life, but abundant life. Not survival, but flourishing; not getting by, but thriving; not just existence, but joy. Jesus offers us more than we can imagine possible.

We need to notice that there is surprisingly little talk of sin in this passage. This is the key to a good reading of this passage, I believe.

Notice that Jesus does not say I came because these sheep have screwed it all up, and that I came to offer forgiveness to them. Now don't get me wrong; Jesus does teach of those who get things wrong and the way that he has come to offer forgiveness, absolutely.

But in terms of reading this passage, we should note this is not a story where Christ is the one who separates. You see; the shepherd in this metaphor isn't about which sheep get in. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice.

He calls his sheep by name and leads them out. Jesus leads the sheep out. Not in.

You see; if we start with sin, and then forgiveness, we end up drawing a smaller circle. We end up focused on the "all who enter by me will be saved." We ask the seemingly inevitable questions about who is in and who is out. We can get lost in the weeds of doing the work of God. We fall into the very human trap of drawing a circle around our community, one that excludes those who don't fit within our own.

We build walls. We shut out others. We are afraid of the stranger, the foreigner, the ones who have hurt us.

I want to be clear. I'm not just talking about conservative or even a liberal bent here. There isn't a side in the clear.

Everyone has someone that they want to exclude. Behavior researchers have been asking the question, "Can a sense of 'us' exist without a sense of 'them'?" Is it inevitable that humanity must find a "them" to fight?

Whether it is inevitable or not, it doesn't take long to know the "us and them" dynamics. It happens everywhere from preschool classrooms, to country clubs, to political rallies. I believe this is the very sort of thinking that Jesus came to dislodge.

In the story that sets up Jesus telling this story to the Pharisees, they had just thrown a man out, whom Jesus healed because his healing didn't fit within their framework for healing. This man was born blind, and now that the man can see, he is teaching that Jesus' healing was from God. This doesn't fit within their framework, so they literally cast the man out.

I think this is what Jesus is referencing when he talks about the bandit shepherds whose voice is telling us. "It can't work." "If you do that, then this will happen, and you will lose." Even as readers of this text, we jump into the "us versus them" mentality.

We wrongly assume that Jesus must be saying some won't get this abundant life. There are portions of the gospels where Jesus says things like that, but not here.

Here Jesus is saying that all the sheep know his voice. The ones who climb over the walls are here just to steal and kill and destroy.

Yet, we are so engrained with this confirmation bias, that we see what isn't in the text. Nowhere in our passage does Jesus say that these bandit shepherds will succeed. In fact, he says the opposite. He tells us that his sheep "they won't follow a stranger's voice."

Jesus, instead, is telling us that he is drawing an even bigger circle. He's adding another layer of those whom others had said were outside the gate. He goes on in chapter 10 of John to say that he "has other sheep that don't belong to this sheep pen."

Jesus is telling us that we do not need the seemingly inevitable cultural dynamic of "us and them" to follow the voice of the shepherd. That "us and them" fear-based mentality will just steal life when Christ offers abundant life.

Abundant life isn't inside the sheep pen but in the pasture.

So, you want to know if the whispers you hear in your own life are from Jesus? Listen to them and see which are offering more life, a fuller life. The only way you lose out on abundant life is to stop listening.

Jesus doesn't go on to explain a lot about what he means by abundant life. This story does come in reference to the healing of the man born blind. In fact, as Karoline Lewis reminds us, we cannot hope to read this passage if we don't first locate it in the story it follows.

So, what does abundant life mean for the man born blind? For the man born blind, abundant life is sight. It is a release from dependence. It is freedom and light and new opportunity. This, in turn, invites each of us to imagine that abundant life as highly contextual.

One of the great strengths of our Disciples denominational perspective on faith is that we locate the understanding of the gospel not within a central authority, not within creedal confessions, not within pastoral teachings, but within you. You are the one who knows better than I do what is abundance for you.

For a single parent, it might be companionship and help. For a bullied teen, it might be acceptance and someone to advocate for them. For the impoverished neighborhood, it might be dignity and the chance at self-determination. For the retiree, it might be involved in a worthwhile cause. For...well, you get it.

Abundant life looks different in different places and to different people. Yet it always manifests itself as more, not less. Think larger circles, not smaller ones.

The false voices are the ones that try to convince you that you can't have life, purpose, and joy. The false voices try to convince you that only escape from your particularities will deliver you.

But our Christ, our God, the Holy Spirit does her best work within the particulars of life. God's story isn't one of staying back there and orchestrating things from a grand perspective. Our God's story is one where God chooses to come close, into the broken places of the world, to give sight to the blind. Abundant life is not simply a promise of some distant eternal future, but it is a concrete invitation to discover life right now by extending it to those around you!

Church shouldn't be a place that you go to hear about abundant life. It is the place that sends us out to experience and shares it as we commit ourselves to the wellbeing of all God's children and the world that God loves so much.

God is in the peacemaking. God is giving voice to the silent. God is with the poor, and those who strive to fight poverty. God is in generosity, not in scarcity. God is including, not exclusionary.

Remember the Good Shepherd, in this passage, isn't leading the sheep into the pen but out of it. He's the gate that frees people to live how they were designed to live.

Jesus enters our fenced lives and leads us out.

You see; there is a tendency among non-Christians, and even among long-time Christians, to think that the Christian life is meant to be narrow, limited, and certainly without fun. There is the false idea that says the ideal Christian life is supposed to be bland, reserved, staid—white toast, vanilla. When we become Christians—or when we start to take our faith seriously—it means that we can't do all the fun things we used to, or say the things we used to, or drink the things we used to, or party the way we used to.

But what Jesus says is that he's not here to lead us into a constraint. He's here to lead us out!

Now, admittedly, all things in excess can end up taking away life. That's what addiction is; when you talk to people who are addicted to alcohol, to drugs, to shopping, to food, to sex, to their work, to their looks, etc., they don't talk about how "free" they are, because of all they can eat, buy, smoke, or do.

They talk about how they just can't stop. They talk about it in terms of bondage. And, what Jesus does...he sets us free. He breaks us out of the pen.

In fact, the Greek text of John 10 literally reads: "*He throws us out.*" And he takes us to the pasture he calls in verse ten, "*life abundant.*"

Jesus comes to free us from the world of bondage, sin, excesses, addictions, and constraints. Jesus leads us out to be born through the gates of God's new life, where not even death and destruction can touch us.

Like sheep, who follow the voice of their shepherd, we can be free!

So, go out from this place, drawing bigger circles, freeing more people from the bondage of their lives, their ideas, their small pens. The gospel is always more, bigger circles, including all that came before it, and bonding it all to become more.

Go be the gatekeepers who throw open gates. Join in with the voice of Christ and proclaim that Christ came not to destroy, kill, or lock up, but to give abundant life, a fuller life.

A fuller life is a life full of radical love. A fuller life is full of ...Loving the unlovely. A fuller life is full of ...Serving the ungrateful. A fuller life is full of ...Compassion for the corrupt. A fuller life is full of ...Welcoming the outcast.

The theologian James Alison put it this way, "Gates are designed for defining who is in and who is out." But in John 10, the sheep go out freely into the life that Jesus showed us how to live.

Many voices call our name. Listen to the one who offers abundant life to all the sheep. If you pay attention, I know you can identify that voice.

Thanks be to God. Amen.