

Sermon for Good Shepherd Sunday, May 7, 2017 - "The Living Gate"

Fourth Sunday of Easter
Good Shepherd Sunday
May 7, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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The Living Gate

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

This spring, Good Shepherd Sunday School kids learned about our Psalm for today, Psalm 23, and about how God is our Shepherd. Then for a field trip, many of the kids, teachers, parents, a grandma and I went to visit local shepherd Barb Krause and her sheep at Canoe Creek farm.

During our visit, we got to help lead the sheep from the barn into a sheep pen. The sheep didn't really listen to us and it was a little bit crazy for a while. The sheep did listen to the voice of their shepherd, Barb, and eventually the sheep and the kids got safely into the sheep pen.

Well, all but one of the sheep got safely into the pen. There was one little guy who went the other direction out of the barn. Eventually he made it to one of the fences on a side of the pen, but he wasn't at the part with the gate so he couldn't get in. To get to the gate he would have to go down the hill, around the barn, and back up the hill. He couldn't see the way in and Barb was busy helping the kids and other sheep, so he was stuck outside the pen for a while.

There were no visible wolves or thieves or bandits, but that little sheep looked so vulnerable outside of the protection of the sheep pen. And, he clearly wanted to be inside. He kept making this very loud crying sound over and over and over again. He kept running along that part of the fence trying to get in. The other sheep would come over to him and you could tell they wanted him inside with them. The kids and all of us wanted him in, too, but he wasn't at the gate and we couldn't get him there.

We see that little sheep everywhere in our world today - in people desperate to get into places of rest, safety and community. He is the Syrian seeking refuge, the unaccompanied minor fleeing violence in Guatemala, the unemployed worker searching for dignity, the mother who can't get access to health care.

We want those sheep to have a resting place where they can go in and out and find safe pasture; yet there are so many barriers. How can we help these sheep get to a gate? How can we help that gate to open to them?

Sometimes each of us are that little sheep. Sometimes we feel cut off from others and from God, at the mercy of thieves that kill and steal and destroy the abundant life God longs for us to have - thieves like cancer, anxiety, grief, heartbreak. We run ourselves ragged trying to find a way into nourishment, to peace, to community.

We wonder if there is some gate, some path, some answer that we're missing - something we just haven't found that could help us and the world we love. Of course, we know there's always something but it can feel like a long way around, a winding path to get there. And, we're not always sure if we have enough energy or commitment.

Jesus says he has come so that all may have abundant life: that all may have peace and wellbeing and enough.

Yet, how do we access that and make it available to others? How do we get to the gate ourselves and help others find it?

In our Gospel reading today Jesus says, "I am the gate." That means that the gate is not a spot we have to find. The gate isn't a thing that sits waiting for us to take the right path, overcome the obstacles and get to the correct spot in the fence. The gate is the Good Shepherd who is always searching for all of us, always working to draw us all into God's abundance.

The gate is not a fixed, rigid place but a living shepherd who is alive and on the move - always opening space for us all to experience the life God wants us all to have. The gate is Jesus' own body which is broken open for us all.

Jesus offers his very body as space for reconciliation with God and one another, as space for us to enter into abundant life.

Jesus also draws us into his body so that we, too, become an access point for others - so that we can make God's abundance available to others.

We don't have to feel powerless as we see all the sheep seeking refuge and peace. Yes, there are so many barriers; but we are now part of the broken and risen body of Christ, the body that has overcome even death itself, the body that cannot be stopped from working reconciliation and new life for all of creation. Christ's body is alive and at work in the world and we are now part of that. We now share the work of making abundant life, wellbeing, refuge, safety and rest available to all people.

This metaphor of Jesus as the gate is not a well-loved metaphor; it's much less popular than the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. We never celebrate Gate Sunday or sing hymns like The Lord's My Gate. The image of Jesus as a gate can feel narrow and exclusive - as if Christianity is some kind of gated community.

Yet the gate, the access point, is not a fixed spot but a living body. The gate is a broken yet risen body, a body that cannot be contained, a body that is always breaking open for all to know God's abundance. Today as we celebrate Solveig's baptism and new member Sunday; we give thanks that together we are part of Christ's body opened for the sake of the world. As we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday and all the wonderful hymns about our shepherd, we remember that the shepherd is also the gate for us and all people.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.