

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: April 30, 2023 Year A, 4th Sunday in Easter, "Good Shepherd Sunday"

Text: John 10:1-10, Psalm 23

Title: Who Needs a Gatekeeper?

Focus: When we have seen abuses of power stemming from those who function as a gatekeeper which exclude and harm, hearing that Jesus says, "I am the gate" can be confusing. What is Jesus' intent or what does he mean? Jesus seeks to protect the sheep/followers from danger within and beyond the Church.

Gospel Reading: John 10:1-10

¹"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. 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.

". . . You Are Welcome Here"

Last Sunday at 10:30 a.m. between worship services, a group of us, perhaps 50 in number, gathered to post and raise the Pride flag out on the corner near the Good Shepherd sign. The raising of the Pride flag was in response to what happened back in January. On the last Sunday in January, just before worship was to begin, I discovered that our flag had been taken down and trashed and an ugly, hateful message was left on the front door of the church. Our worship service that day was to celebrate our Reconciling in Christ (RIC) heritage and I had posted the Pride flag on Monday of that week. RIC or Reconciling in Christ is our intentional effort to welcome LGBTQ+ folks and others who have been made to feel unwelcome and unloved by the church. The raising of the flag this past Sunday was an affirmation of the breadth and depth of the love of God, which we know in Christ Jesus and our determination to continue to be a welcoming place even following that vandalism and hateful message.

At the close of the gathering, we recited our Welcome Statement, which concludes,

- "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. This is a place where lives are made new. Come and see!"

Good Shepherd Sunday

Today it is “Good Shepherd Sunday” in the Church liturgical calendar. It’s Good Shepherd Sunday not because of the name of our particular congregation, Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, but because on this Sunday, the fourth Sunday in the season of Easter, the designated readings from the lectionary, over all 3 years of the Lectionary cycle, always include the 23rd psalm, which is David’s psalm, comparing the protection and provision that God offers to how a shepherd cares for her¹ sheep. “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”

The gospel reading over the 3 years of the Lectionary cycle is one of 3 portions of John chapter 10 in which Jesus talks about the relationship between sheep and the shepherd.

- We are currently in the first year of the cycle, Year A, and the designated portion of John is 10:1-10.
- Next year, the second section, is verses 11-18
- Then verses 22-30 in Year 3 or C of the cycle.

I’m taking time to describe these designated readings because I want to distinguish between the gospel text we have before us today and the other portions of John 10.

In the 23rd Psalm, the imagery is of God as the shepherd: **“The Lord is my shepherd. . .”**

In the second reading from John, which we’ll have next year, Jesus says directly,

- ¹¹**“I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”
- ¹⁴**I am the good shepherd.** I know my own and my own know me. . .

What comforting imagery to hear from David and directly from Jesus in John the affirmation that God cares for us, provides for us, protects us from danger or gives us tools to ward off that danger.

- David, who has been a shepherd boy himself, watching over the flock of his father Jesse, knows that there is danger, but in the midst of it affirms God’s presence: **“I will fear no evil, for you are with me. . .”** (Psalm 23:4).

I find that immensely comforting and encouraging. It sounds real to me—the Psalmist does not pretend that risk and danger do not exist, but affirms the presence and power of God, and the tools or resources that God provides.

To be honest, I would love to preach on that theme—and I sure could, as drawn from the 23rd Psalm. But I’m choosing something else—a different focus for today. The reason I’m *not* choosing that focus is that Jesus doesn’t say, “I am the good shepherd” until the second section of John 10, in verses 11 and 14, which, as I said, is the portion designated for *next* year.

¹ Cory Driver notes in his video commentary on this passage that shepherds in the first century were most often women, girls, or young boys. “Moving Forward” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXpjmadiTiA>

The challenge I want to take on today is a different “**I am**” statement of Jesus, which is from this week’s gospel text: “**I am the gate**” (v. 7 and v. 9).

Who Needs a Gatekeeper?

And I’d say that understanding what Jesus means when he identifies as **the gate** is a challenge.

Part of that challenge to understand what Jesus may have intended is that **most of us probably have a negative connotation of a person or group functioning as a gatekeeper**. It may call to mind people with exceptional power who prevent others from entering a particular venue or institution or profession, for instance. And because they have particular power, we have observed that they can exercise that power capriciously or in a harmful way, such as to unfairly exclude minorities.

And when others recognize that gatekeepers have particular power, we have also seen how people can unfairly seek to gain favor with that gatekeeper—with those who have that power. Others, who have their own power, can manipulate and coerce that power held by the gatekeeper. Instead of being judged on merits or following the rules, those who want to gain access can slip the doorman, the actual or metaphorical doorman, some cash to buy their way in.

College Admissions Scandal: A few years back, for instance, there were well-publicized cases of wealthy celebrities and other powerful people paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for their kids who were high-school seniors to bypass the college admissions process to facilitate their admission into some of the most exclusive universities in the country. These celebrities and others involved in the scheme, about 50 people in all, were charged with bribery, falsifying test scores, and other forms of fraud.² There was one guy who portrayed himself as a college-admissions guru, but who later plead guilty after being prosecuted for running a bogus charity that facilitated these payments and deceptions.

Too often, the function of a gatekeeper has been used to exclude and harm deserving people. It creates a setting in which power can be abused as a way of declaring who is in or out or who belongs to the club.

This is a part of why we are skeptical about the role or function of a gate or gatekeeper and why we have a negative connotation with the term. Even more specifically to who we are and what we say we value at Good Shepherd Church,

- **How does the gate or gatekeeper metaphor work in a church that says, “No matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”**

Based on who we experience Jesus to be, we affirm our value for inclusion and our intent to welcome others. We want to bring people in. How does that jive with this role of the gatekeeper, who seems to want to keep people out?

² See, for instance, Kelly McLaughlin, “The full list of everyone who’s been sentenced in the college admissions scandal so far,” published Dec. 17, 2021 in *Insider*. <https://www.insider.com/college-admissions-scandal-full-list-people-sentenced-2019-9>

Understanding the Gate/Gatekeeper

I think we'll understand better by identifying a few things:

- What was the real-life example on which Jesus was relying as he created this metaphor, **"I am the gate"**? Meaning, how did this function in the everyday first-century world of a shepherd and his or her sheep?
- Second, to whom was Jesus speaking? Who was his audience? What were the real-life concerns in that setting and why was Jesus warning them? How would this metaphor of the gate within the relationship of sheep and shepherd been helpful to them?

Shepherd and Sheep in the First Century³

A shepherd in the first century would have allowed his or her sheep more or less room to roam and graze depending on the risk or danger in the area. Predators could be either wild animals or human thieves. In places of low risk, a shepherd could let the sheep wander more freely. In places of greater risk, either from sheep-attacking wild animals or from sheep-stealing humans, a shepherd would take more precautions. In higher risk places, shepherds could work together to make sheep pens. Several flocks could be kept together, surrounded by an enclosure, so that the shepherds could take some time off from being on high alert. They could also arrange for a professional guard to be hired to keep the sheep safe. In this physical layout of an enclosure or sheep pen, **one of the shepherds could lay in front of the door or gate to the pen**, making sure that no sheep escape and no wild animals or thieves break in. The shepherd *is* the gate.

These are the first-century shepherding practices on which Jesus was relying as he used this metaphor. By saying, "I am the gate," Jesus was saying, as shepherd,

- I seek to protect the sheep from danger.
- I place my body as a barrier to offer that protection--
 - To keep the sheep from wandering out and
 - To keep thieves from stealing them.

You can be sure that anyone who tries to avoid the gate and the gatekeeper doesn't have good intentions for the sheep. They are looking out for themselves rather than the interests of the sheep. Jesus is warning people: "Those who avoid the gate are out for themselves. He's telling us, "Be wise" or "Be cautious" or "Be aware."

Jesus' Audience: To Whom Was He Speaking?

In this metaphor, Jesus is speaking to shepherds. He is speaking to leaders of people. I think the relationship of shepherd and sheep and this metaphor of gate have relevance both within and beyond the Church.

A shepherd, or a leader of people, is called to have the sheep's protection, safety, and care in mind. Jesus is warning us all that not all shepherds or leaders are

³ See Cory Driver, "Lectionary blog: On doors and disciples." Posted April 24, 2023 at *Living Lutheran*. <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/04/lectionary-blog-on-doors-and-disciples/>

trustworthy. Not all leaders put their highest priority on the good of the flock that has been entrusted to their care. There are risks or dangers or predators within the church as well as within society—in other places where people meet and gather.

We talked earlier about having a negative connotation associated with a gatekeeper. We make that negative association because we have seen how people have abused that function or power. Abuse of power occurs within the Church as well and it can harm pastors and leaders as well as members or “regular folks.”

Bullying and Abuse within the Church

A pastor was recently talking about being a “tentmaker,” a term which comes from the Apostle Paul, who himself worked as a tentmaker. It’s used to describe being *bi-vocational* or having two different jobs or roles. With more smaller congregations which are not able to employ a full-time pastor, it’s increasingly common.

This pastor explained that due to family circumstances, she was geographically restricted to working in a certain area. She found full-time work in counseling at a university and then part-time work as a preacher and worship leader in churches in that area. Writing to fellow pastors, she said, “I can tell you it is easier to speak your mind when your livelihood isn’t coming from the congregation you serve.” She also said that “many smaller congregations are happy to have a pastor at all and especially one who can understand the working world in which they are trying to live their faith . . .” (Pastor Jeanne)

Commenting on this pastor’s original post, another pastor described his experience as a bi-vocational leader with full-time work outside the church and a part-time role within it.

Pastor Keith: When I first started at my current church, I was working full-time at night at a trucking company and then part-time at the church. With all the problems members of the congregation had had and had caused over 10+ years, I decided some tough love was needed and so I decided to end some things that weren't working anymore.

One of the elders came up and said to me, "If you don't do what we want, we'll fire you."

I replied, "Fine by me. Then I'll be able to get more sleep with my other job, and y'all won't be able to get a pastor after running through 5 of us in a dozen years."

The look of horror that came across his face was quite priceless as he whispered "Oh my God. I can't threaten you like I did the others."

I smiled and wished him a great day (Posted by Keith).

The power at work in this congregation’s story was money. Money or the threat of being fired was being used to attempt to bully this particular pastor, like the string of pastors before him, into doing what the power people in the church wanted, undoubtedly to the detriment of the church as a whole and the church’s ministry.

This pastor wasn't going to allow himself to be bullied. He confronted the bully and diffused the source of power by saying, "That's fine with me. I'll be better rested to do my other job." The bully instantly knew he could not bully and control this pastor to get his own way or to please the other power people.

In this example, it wasn't the pastor as shepherd who abused power or didn't have the best interests of the sheep at the forefront, but it was leaders within the congregation who demanded their own way by threatening or bullying a string of pastors and attempting to do the same with this one.

Larry Struve's concern for public life and public service.

On the first Saturday in June, we will gather in the sanctuary to give thanks to God for the life of Larry Struve, beloved saint of this congregation since its founding.

Larry was a just and honorable man who devoted his life to the ideals of public service. After graduating from the University of Nevada and then the law school at Berkeley, the bulk of his career was spent in government in the state of Nevada creating just conditions in which all had a chance to thrive.

During a visit I had with him in the last week before his death, we talked about how we have seen abuses of power and people seeking their own welfare to the exclusion of others. Larry expressed his concerns for the just ordering of society. Here's what he said:

- "How will people meet the challenge of public service?"
- "Will power be exercised for the common good?"

These expressions fit precisely with Jesus' warning about the danger that sheep face, the potential for abuse, and the role of the shepherd as gatekeeper to provide protection.

Closing: The Shepherd as Gatekeeper Protects the Sheep

I'll still say that we probably have an aversion to someone functioning as a gatekeeper. We're skeptical and we're too aware of how that role can be abused or is itself subject to manipulation.

And yet Jesus knows that dangers exist. His intent as shepherd is to guide and protect the sheep from the dangers around them. He warns about those whose intent is to steal and destroy, and he's willing to be the gate to protect the sheep or protect his followers from danger within and beyond the Church.

Let us be alert to the dangers of abuse of power which harm the sheep. Thanks be to God the Good Shepherd and to Jesus as the gate.