

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson  
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant  
13<sup>th</sup> April 2008  
Easter IV  
Acts 2:42-47  
John 10:1-10

Psalm 23

1 Peter 2:19-25

This Sunday Jesus paints a picture of himself as the gatekeeper to the sheepfold. The image of God as shepherd is a comforting and familiar one; almost every funeral I have participated in has included the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the one also appointed for this morning, and I suspect that anyone who has spent a couple of years in Sunday school has at least the first verse memorized: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." It is a comfortable image, but one that very few people who live today can relate to from personal experience - we're not shepherders! But when we think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, we feel protected, taken care of.

This morning Jesus does not just refer to himself as a shepherd, he calls himself "the gatekeeper" and "the gate" itself. Once again it is possible to get a nice, comfortable image in mind, of a circular pen, perhaps, with a nice fence, where all of us good sheep can be protected and taken care of by Jesus, who keeps us safe behind the fence and the gate.

But this door is not closed! Jesus as the gate is not a boundary, with you and me comfortably behind it, but rather, *Jesus is opening the fence!*

Through his life and death and resurrection Jesus allows for the boundary to be broken down, he is the open door that allows all people to move from one side of the fence to the other. He allows free passage among and between groups that would otherwise be separated.

And if it is Jesus who is the gate, then it is not our job to shut and lock it. It is not the place of the sheep to say who is in, who is out.

There are people in the Anglican Communion - actually, in Christendom itself, with whom I totally disagree on matters of doctrine. To be with only those who think alike, safe and comfortable little sheep in a nice little enclosed pen, that is an easy way of being in the world. But this is not the life Christ calls us to. We are called instead to be disciples, to worship and work and live together in community. We are called to seek and serve Christ in *all* persons, even those with whom we have serious disagreements. And I am willing to kneel with them in worship. We are the sheep, and it is through the door of Christ that we are freed from the boundaries and fences of exclusion.

Our task as Christians, as Anglicans, as Episcopalians, is not to shut the gate, our task is to recognize that the gate is already open, and to help those around us find that gate.

Our Presiding Bishop has gotten into a lot of hot water over this interview in TIME Magazine way back in October of 2006 – and believe me, among arch-conservatives, the water is still bubbling.

The interviewer asked her, “Is belief in Jesus the only way to get to heaven?”

Bishop Katharine responded, “We who practice the Christian tradition understand him as our vehicle to the divine. But for us to assume that God could not act in other ways is, I think, to put God in an awfully small box.”

To come clean, that’s about how I would answer the question.

It seems to me that for humans to define who is part of the sheepfold and who is not is arrogance. I do believe that Jesus Christ holds the key – and yet I refuse to deny the possibility that other good Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists – who am I leaving out? – possibly even atheists? – might also be sheep in the fold.

*Who are we to limit the capacity of God’s mercy?*

Are we not called to gentleness, respect, and charity?

As the sheep of Jesus we have a particular ear to hear the his voice and to reflect his spirit when we mingle with other flocks – we are called to be peacemakers and to exhibit the fruits of patience, kindness, and self-control. When we listen, when we respect, we are offered a gift – the glimmers of truth in other traditions, which may indeed point us to a new revelation of God in the stranger – and a new revelation in our own relationship with God.

Our first priority is our own discipleship. While it may well be good and even loving to be concerned about the salvation of others, our biggest concern should be our own. St. Paul suggests that we need to work out our own salvation “with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). Craig Kocher, associate dean of the chapel at Duke University, has written, “At times it is appropriate to ask people of other faiths to follow Jesus, but it is *always* appropriate to ask ourselves if we are indeed following in the way, the truth and the life.” (Sermon by Craig Kocher for April 13, 2008)

An understanding of God in absolute terms – I know the truth, you don’t; I’m right, you’re wrong; I’m saved, you’re not – is dangerous turf. It is the stuff of

our history – beginning with the Crucifixion and running through the Crusades, the Inquisition, Bloody Mary and Bloody Elizabeth, right down, for some people, to slavery, the subjugation of women, and – again, note that I say “for some people” – the war in Iraq and the almost breathtaking fear of anyone who is different. *It is called the sin of pride.*

Unfortunately, that’s where today’s Gospel lesson has taken some people.

But it doesn’t need to be this way.

Today’s Gospel can offer us comfort instead. We have a shepherd. We are rounded up, protected through the dark night, cared for when we’re spiritually injured, loved for ever.

The revelation of Jesus Christ is that the nature of God is not the property of the chosen people alone – that the love of God extends to all of creation. Even St. Paul got that when he went out among the –gasp-- Gentiles. We must remember that Jesus didn’t make any rules for Christians – *there weren’t any Christians!!* Jesus was talking about *faith*, about a gate through which we pass on our journey to God.

*Maybe* he was even talking about the gate through which God passes to get to *us*.

I just have a hard time being convinced that salvation belongs only to us Christians. I just have a hard time being convinced that a child born in the far reaches of Peru is automatically damned because he’ll never hear of Jesus, or that Gandhi is damned because he was Hindu, or the Buddha, or any number of other worthy people – including your Jewish neighbor and that nice lady down the street who doesn’t go to church but serves soup every day to homeless people. I just can’t be convinced.

And so we’ve wandered a bit through this prickly Gospel lesson. Or I have, anyway. Jesus’ message, as is so often the case, is difficult. Challenging. Yet it all comes back to his enormous love for us, and his yearning that we listen.

Let us listen to him with gentle respect and awe.

And let us listen to our non-Christian brothers and sisters as well. They may have something to teach us about God. They may even teach us something about Jesus.

Amen.