

St. John's Lutheran Church
February 20, 2008

"I Am the Gate of the Sheep"
John 10:7-10

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Dear students in preparation for the celebration of the affirmation of your baptisms, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Some of you might remember me telling the story, soon after we arrived to live and work in Lakeville, some 8 or 9 years ago, of an experience Debbie and I had at that time, when we went to Sunday morning worship at a Lutheran Church while we were on vacation. We were traveling that Sunday, but the day before we had verified the location of a church, its address, and the time of worship, in a city we knew we would be driving through that Sunday morning,

We arrived in town on time and had no problem finding the church. The parking lot was full of cars and we even wondered if perhaps we were a little late. But as we walked up the front sidewalk we could see plenty of people still visiting in the narthex. It was a front entry into a narthex much like ours. There was lots of glass and glass front doors except that there wasn't the double door with a vestibule configuration like we have. You just entered right from the side walk into the narthex through a single set of glass doors.

So, I reached for the front door handle to open the door for Debbie only to discover that the door was locked. I was very surprised. So I knocked on the glass for someone to open it for us, but it was so noisy inside no one could hear my knock. So I grabbed the door handle and shook the door to try to make more noise and a little boy of maybe 10 years old turned around and saw me trying to get in.

He walked over to the door, cupped his hands around his mouth against the glass, and shouted through the glass, "We don't use this door! Go around to the side!" I looked at Debbie with surprise. A church that locks its front door on Sunday morning! Well, we went around to the side of the building and once we got inside I never got around to asking anyone about why the front door was locked.

But I thought again about that difficulty of finding an open door into that church the first part of this week as I was preparing this sermon on our Gospel Reading tonight from the Gospel of John, the 10th chapter. For the picture Jesus seems to have in his mind's eye is a picture of a sheep pasture that has a fence around it. And there is only one gate into the pasture. And in order for the sheep to get into the pasture they have to use that gate. Jesus wants his listeners to know that here is a gate into the pasture. And that, in him, that gate is unlocked and opened.

William Barclay, a 20th Scottish Biblical scholar and teacher wrote about two different kinds of sheepfolds in rural areas of Jesus' time. In the villages and towns there were sheep-folds that were provided for everyone. All the village flocks were sheltered in them when they returned home to the village for the night. These folds were protected by a strong door of which only the guardian of the door held the key.

On the other hand, when the sheep were out on the hills in the warm season, when the sheep did not return at night to the village at all, at night they were collected into sheepfolds out on the hillside. These hillside sheep-folds were just open spaces in the fields enclosed by a wall. In the wall there was an opening by which the sheep came in and went out; but there was no door on the opening of any kind.

What happened was that at night the shepherd himself lay down across the opening and entrance, and no sheep could get out or in except over his body. In the most literal sense the shepherd was the door. There was no access to the sheepfold except through him. Jesus said, "I am the gate for the sheep. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved."

The pasture, of which Jesus speaks, ultimately, is heaven. And we are the sheep. And he is the gate whereby we are invited to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Lutheran expression of the Christian Church traces itself back through history to a Roman Catholic, Martin Luther, who left law school as a young man to enter a monastery. While in the monastery Luther began to question how to find the gate to heaven. Luther began to question how to find the gate that opens up unto eternal salvation.

Luther's problem was that he had heard his teachers say that God saves those who really want to be saved. And Luther had heard his teachers also say that God saves those who really show their desire to be saved through the manner in which they live their lives.

One question Luther had was the question of how you knew if you really and truly wanted to be saved. On the one hand he truly did think that he did want to be saved. He truly did think that he did want to go to

heaven. But when he wondered about it he wondered if perhaps he only thought that he wanted to be saved. And maybe what was really going on with him was just that he was scared of going to hell. It was not so much, perhaps, he thought, that he was in love with God and heaven, but just that he was scared of punishment and hell. So how, he wondered, can you be sure that you want to be saved genuinely enough so that heaven's gates will open for you and let you in?

In the same way Luther had something of the same question about how you knew if your life was really showing your desire to be saved. Luther did all of the religious exercises that were required of him in the monastery and even went beyond that which was reasonable. But, again, he sometimes questioned his own sincerity and wondered if there was a part of him that was just putting on a show. Or he wondered where the cut off truly was, when a person had done enough to show his desire and worthiness for salvation.

It was Luther's Bible study that finally answered his questions for him. And, in particular, it was the book of Romans, in the Bible, that answered Luther's question about finding the gate to heaven. And about knowing when you can be sure that the gate to heaven has been opened for you.

If there was one Bible verse that helped Luther, it is said to be Romans, chapter 1, verse 17. In that verse we read the following, "...the (events of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection reveal) how God puts people right with himself: it is through faith from beginning to end. As the scripture says, "The person who is put right with God through faith shall live."

What Luther understood that Bible verse to be saying was that it is God who accomplishes salvation for humankind through the satisfaction that Christ has made in his suffering and death. And it is God who accomplishes salvation for humankind by working the work of faith in the heart of humankind. God is at work in your life, dear friend in Christ, even this moment to accomplish your salvation by grace through faith in Jesus.

Tying these thoughts back to our reading this evening, then, is to say that yes, it is Jesus and his righteousness who is the gate for the sheep. It is Jesus and his righteousness who is the means whereby we will be saved. It is Jesus and his righteousness who is the means whereby we shall enter the kingdom of heaven by grace, through faith.

What, do you think, Jesus means when he indicates that the result of our receiving salvation will be that we will come in and go out and find pasture? It almost makes it sound like Jesus will make it possible for us to come in and go out of heaven as we please, with him as the gate!

It is helpful to know that Jesus is talking figuratively when he speaks of "going out and coming in." It is not an unusual figure of speech in the Bible – "going out and coming in." In Psalm 121, for instance, the psalmist speaks of God watching over us. And one of the ways the psalmist says it is that the Lord will "Keep your going out and your coming in from this time on and forever." And to some degree the sense of what the psalmist is saying is that your "going out and your coming in" has to do with your whole life. And what is being promised is that God will keep your whole life now and forevermore.

Perhaps in the same way when Jesus speaks here of the sheep "coming in and going out and finding pasture", Jesus is speaking of the security of the sheep. In this earthly life and in heaven as well. For, as Jesus concludes, he has come "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Included in that abundant life is the confidence today of eternal salvation and the Lord's daily keeping of us in our earthly lives as well. Included in that abundant life will be life eternal in heaven, as we live for all eternity in the sheepfold guarded by the gate, Jesus Christ himself. Amen.