

Year A, 4th Sunday of Easter

John 10:1-10

“Un-ambivalently For Us”

There is only one legitimate way into the sheep pen; through the gate. Whoever climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. We know that Jesus is the gate but can we take the metaphor any deeper and what do the wall-climbers do that make them so dangerous?

Let's start with the wall. The wall was constructed to protect sheep from predation. Anyone climbing over it wants to get something for themselves at the sheep's expense. They don't care about the sheep. They want to exploit them.

To climb over the wall is to have a hidden agenda in approaching the sheep. Rivalry could be their reason for jumping the fence. Such a thief is trying to steal what does not belong to them. Maybe the thief wants unqualified admiration, the other's well-earned social position in the community, special skills the other has or maybe it's the other's very being they wish to steal. They are in rivalry with the sheep and want to fleece them to aggrandize themselves. Strange as it sounds, they believe the sheep have something they are missing and must have so they try to steal it from the sheep.

The thief is an outlaw for he operates outside God's desire. God is for us but these thieves are not. The only legitimate way into the sheep pen is through wanting what's best for the sheep. Jesus is very sure of this. He begins his statement with “I assure you...”

The shepherd enters through the gate because he is the only one who really cares about the sheep “un-ambivalently.” There is no dark side to his care, no hidden agenda, and no rivalry. He is totally for them.

“Un-ambivalent” is a very important word to me. We humans almost always have a hidden agenda in our relationships whether we know it or not, even in our closest relationships. We can't get to absolute purity where we are totally for the other. We can move in that direction but we don't ever totally get there and I think it's best to just admit that. It keeps us self-reflective and humble for we always must consider the possibility of self-delusion. But the shepherd who is Jesus is pure in his intentions. He is absolutely for us and has proven it by being willing to die on the cross. So the gate is Jesus' willingness to be un-ambivalently for us and he is the only one qualified to use that gate.

“The guard at the gate opens the gate for him.” Does that make God the gate keeper? The guard seems to know the shepherd. They share the same desire for keeping the sheep safe. Do you suppose the gate keeper and the shepherd are related? The guard opens the gate for the shepherd. Is this a metaphor for God sending us his son? I find it a comforting thought.

“The sheep listen to his voice.” Those who are willing to be led listen to his voice. They are O.K. with being sheep rather than goats who chart their own course, needing no one. Of course, the

irony is that those who think they are following their own star are really directed by voices outside their vision. Maybe the voice is off-stage or hidden in the past. This voice may have been acquired very early in life and no longer adaptive to the present situation. This is one of the areas in which Rene Girard has helped us see more clearly.

“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” When I was a little boy I used to wonder who my future wife would be. When I asked my mother she told me God has someone planned for me. At that moment images of unattractive girls would pop into my head. I sure hope it’s not that girl over in Iowa who is so homely, I thought to myself. I wasn’t sure I wanted God to choose; God might not have an eye for who is attractive.

But he calls his sheep by name. If the shepherd is really for me, he is going to be interested in what I, in my particularity, like. My “selfness”, my uniqueness, my individuality is not going to be ignored. To be a follower of this shepherd does not mean you become like all the other sheep. This shepherd knows each one’s unique voice and honors it. I find all of this very comforting and true as I reflect on my own life. “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

Notice how he goes before them leading the way. They choose in their freedom to follow him. They are not driven by sheep dogs biting at their heel; their direction determined by those they fear. There is no fear involved in this scene. They follow their shepherd because they want to, because they find him attractive, because they trust him and believe he is leading them to new and richly nurturing ground.

They follow him because they know his voice. His voice is a comfort to them and they feel safe. When our granddaughters were very small they were afraid of me because my voice was deeper, louder and less gentle than the voice of their parents or grandmother. I was a stranger to them and they would run away from me. I learned to soften my voice for their sake.

Children, in their vulnerability, are very aware of harshness. They can tell you who is mean and who they are afraid of. Last Sunday I asked our young disciples what they thought Jesus was like. The first thing they said was Jesus was gentle.

This section of John ends with the narrator saying, “Those who heard Jesus use this analogy (about the sheep pen and the shepherd) didn’t understand what he was saying.” I suspect it was too far from their lived experience. In their experience most leaders fleece them, use them, lie to them, force them to do things they don’t want to do and always speak with harsh voices. They can’t imagine someone being for them with no hidden agenda.

“So Jesus spoke again” and this time he was more explicit. “I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep,” he said. We humans have hemmed ourselves in and find ourselves trapped in desolate places. We have lost our freedom to our fears and our violence. Jesus has come to be the gate out of our entrapment. Belief in Jesus as the one who is for us, as the one who is not in rivalry with us, and as the one who leads us to life, empowers him to be our gate.

Those who came before Jesus didn't really care about the sheep. They all had hidden agendas. They were robbers and outlaws. I wonder if Jesus is thinking of Rome and empire; of temple taxes and the corrupt religious bureaucracy that only added to the people's burden. The sheep who follow Jesus don't listen to strange and harsh voices.

"I am the gate," he says. "Whoever enters through me will be saved." I used to think he was talking about heaven and being saved beyond our death. Now I think he is talking about much more. Jesus is the gate to a world with no "over-against-ness." With no "us and them" where all are saved who desire it and no one excluded. All have access to life sustenance and can go in and out freely. In Jesus the world is finally whole and all are embraced. This has always been God's intention, the reason he sent Jesus to live among us and the full demonstration of his being for us all. Jesus put it this way, "I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest." Amen.