**HOMILY FOR APRIL 30, 2023 John 10:1-10 “Knowing Your Shepherd’s Voice”**

Jesus said, “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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

There is a popular story from the World War II era of the great American pilot, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, who was flying on a special mission to the Pacific Islands. The plane crashed, and Rickenbacker and his crew were lost at sea for 21 days. Rickenbacker wrote of that experience: "In the beginning many of the men were atheists or agnostics, but at the end of the terrible ordeal each had, in his own way, discovered God. Each man found God in the vast, empty loneliness of the ocean." That sounds like a good thing, doesn’t it? Something we would all be in favor of, when we hear Rickenbacker say that "each man, in his own way, discovered God" on his own terms. Yet, if that is the case with those brave souls over 80 years ago who "found God in the vast, empty loneliness of the ocean," why is it that so many Christians today cannot believe that the same thing might be true for millions of people around the world who have found God, in their own ways, outside of our Christian religion? What makes us think that the only people on earth who have found God, or better, have been found by God, are Christians?

The answer most often given to this question is ostensibly from the lips of Jesus himself: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved…." The same gospel writer makes a similar point in chapter 14, where Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me." It feels like we would be well within our rights to encourage others, and ourselves, to just use the gate! You wanna get into heaven? Use the gate!

We know pretty well, from our archaeological friends, what Jesus was alluding to here. The sheepfold was an enclosure, of earth or rock, usually both, high enough that predators could not jump over the walls, kind of a big pen, with one opening, sometimes two, and at night, herds of sheep and goats could be guided into these enclosures for a modicum of safety. The shepherd, don’t get ahead of me here, would literally *become* the gate, sleeping or guarding right in the doorway, so that nothing got in that wasn’t supposed to go in, and nothing got out that wasn’t supposed to go out. Further, these sheepfolds were often large enough to hold several flocks, who would inevitably intermingle during the night, and in the morning, the shepherds would call them out, and the sheep would respond to the voice they knew, and *only that voice*. You can see why this is such an attractive image for a preacher! But what isimportant to remember, I think, is that these images are *metaphors* of faith, figures of speech in which a word denoting one idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness between them. The writer of John's gospel loves human metaphors: Jesus is the "shepherd," the "bread of life," the "true vine," the "light of the world," the "gate," the "way," the "truth," the "life," etc. No Christian, no matter how literalist, thinks that Jesus is transformed into an actual wooden gate, or an actual rooted vine…on paper, at least, we all understand that these are metaphors,

And as metaphors, they are definitively useful for Christians today. Jesus is our "gate" into God's realm, God's reign, God's life. He is our "good shepherd" who cares for us spiritually and provides a safe place for us to be accepted for who we truly are. He "lays down his life for us." He is "the bread of life" and "the wine of joy" for those whose hunger and thirst cannot be satiated by the hyped-up secularism of our age. He is "the way, the truth, and the life" for us: our truest and deepest experience of the invisible God. He leads us to living water; he feeds our souls in abundance. *We* are quite comfortable using the Jesus gate.

But to say that this is true for us as Christians is *not* to say that our language or experience must be true for all people. Marcus Borg tells the story about a sermon preached by a Hindu professor in a Christian seminary a while back. The text for the day included the "one way" passage, and about it the Hindu professor said, "This verse is absolutely true - Jesus is the only way." But he went on to say, "And that way - of dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being - is known in all of the religions of the world." The way of Jesus is a universal way, paradoxically a way known to millions who may have never even heard of Jesus."

Here is what I know: this way of Jesus is not about a set of beliefs, it is about a way of life. This gate through which we are invited to walk in faith is just the entry to a new life: it is not the new life itself. Who wants to live in a doorway, right? We say, with vigor, that believing in Jesus is important, but I gotta say, there is so much more to this than just believing certain doctrines *about* Jesus, as though one entered new life by simply believing certain things to be true, or as if the only people who can be saved are those who manage to croak out the name 'Jesus.' Thinking that way virtually amounts to salvation by syllables….or, as one of my musically critical friends once sang, Adjectives! We worship adjectives! Rather, the way of Jesus is the way of death and resurrection - the path of transition and transformation from an old way of being to a new way of being.

The way of Jesus that modern progressive Christians embrace is the way of nonviolent love over and against violent injustice. The root meaning of the word, "believe" in both Greek and Latin, means, "to give one's heart to". Here at Trinity, and places like ours, we are people of the heart, we lead with the heart, we even have it in our old church byline, the church with a heart that cares for everyone. Our love and our beliefs *cannot be* two separate categories; what we give our heart to, and what we love, need to be merged. Or, we could think of it this way; for the Christian, "to believe" really means, "to be-love." That relationship transforms us into more and more compassionate beings, "into the likeness of Christ". We say that Jesus is "one with God." He is the disclosure of what a life chock full of God looks like. For Christians, these claims should not be watered down. And we *can* grow to the point where we can say "This is who Jesus is for us" without being compelled to add, "And God is known only in Jesus, in this specific way, so there, you dirty rotten heathens, you!" Use the gate, heathens!

Isaiah Berlin said this: "It is a terrible and dangerous arrogance to believe that you alone are right, that you have a magical eye which sees the truth and others cannot be right if they disagree. This makes it certain that there is one way and one way only, and that it is worth any amount of suffering (particularly on the part of other people) if only the way prevails."

Rev. Joe Hough, former president of Union Theological Seminary, puts the matter clearly: "It is high time that Christian fundamentalism is called into account for what it is: a distortion of Christianity, resting on an exclusive claim by some Christians that theirs is the only 'true' religion and that all others are evil [or at least inferior]. It is this sort of exclusivist claim that has been at the heart of much of the sorry Christian history of religious wars between Christians, crusades against the Muslims, and continued persecution of the Jews. In these episodes, Christianity has acted as the *enemy* of peace and goodwill. In our religiously pluralistic nation, such a narrowly triumphalist Christianity echoes the divisive and dangerous fundamentalism that we find so alarming in other religions… What is required in this time is a 'new' Christian theology of religions that moves us beyond tolerance toward genuine respect, or even reverence, for other great religious traditions….What is essential for Christian faith is that we know we have seen the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It is not necessary for us to deny that another has seen God in another face at another place or time…remember, the sheep follow their own shepherds, right?

All that having been said, I would not say that all religions are equal for me. I am a committed Christian, but I am a Christian who strongly believes that God is working everywhere in exciting ways that we do not yet even know to redeem the world….wherever there are faithful practitioners of religious traditions who live with compassion toward other people, who live responsibly toward the world, and who enhance the human community," God is at work. But let me be even more clear: Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior. I commend him to anyone seeking to know God. Christ is my doorway into God; the gate for this ornery old goat. He is not, perhaps, a doorway that everyone can use, and he is certainly not the only doorway; but he is my doorway, and I’m guessing yours, too.

You and I may not see these things the same way. The important thing is that we give one another the freedom to experience our common faith differently. There are a lot of people out there searching for God in the vast, empty loneliness of the secular ocean. How beautiful it would be if our visible commitment to God in Jesus Christ led them to discover God in their own way. I think Edwin Markham sums it up best in his poem, "Outwitted": He drew a circle that shut me out -heretic, rebel, a thing to flout. But Love and I had the wit to win; We drew a circle that took him in." May that be true of each of us, and of this church. *Amen.*