

Easter 4-April 30, 2023

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

John 10:1-10

Given for You -Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, we don't hear another post resurrection appearance of Jesus as has been the case in the first weeks of Easter. Instead, on this Sunday we turn to the wonderful image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The Psalm of the Day, the 23rd Psalm is nearly as familiar to us as John 3:16. When families who are planning a funeral are asked about a scripture they would like included in the funeral service, if they don't know many scriptures, they likely have heard this Psalm used before knowing that this Psalm will deliver words of comfort and hope they need to hear.

Just before the gospel reading from John for today, Jesus had just healed the man who had been born blind and left the religious leaders questioning among themselves if Jesus was accusing them of being spiritually blind. The reading ends with them saying, "Surely we aren't blind, are we?" In today's gospel, Jesus is still talking to this same audience when he tells them that anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. Jesus was now not only accusing these religious leaders of being blind, but now he was calling them thieves and bandits. The Pharisees who considered themselves to be "good" shepherds of their flocks are told by Jesus, they are killing and destroying their flocks by what they are teaching them.

What really troubled these religious leaders was when Jesus said there was only one way into the sheepfold, and He was the way. Jesus told them twice that **He is the gate**. Jesus didn't say that he was another way or an alternative entrance into the sheepfold. Jesus said that He was the only way and any other way into the sheepfold would be using the same methods that someone who has come to rob you would use.

Jesus had been directing his words toward the religious leaders that day, but he is aiming these same words at us today and they can make us squirm in our pews a little if not make us want to shut our ears to what Jesus is saying. None of us have much problem with the image of Jesus being our shepherd, but if that is true, does that necessarily mean that all of us are sheep? Are we ALL like the sheep that have gone astray? Or are we smarter sheep or more obedient sheep than other sheep? Smart sheep and obedient sheep are oxymorons or words that go together as rarely as sleep deprived parents of newborns who hear that good sleep is described as sleeping like a baby. Babies more often are the cause of a lack of sleep than an example of restful sleep.

But these readings for the 4th Sunday in Easter are not about the reality of the needy nature of sheep. It is about the giving nature of the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said that the sheep will know the voice of the good shepherd. I don't know of many current day impersonators. When I was growing up, Rich Little was a well-known impersonator who could do a wide variety of familiar voices. If you couldn't see him, you wouldn't know the difference between his voice and the voice of the real person he was impersonating. Rich Little did voices and mannerisms of many prominent people such as presidents like Ronald Reagan, actors like Jimmy Stewart, and late-night talk show hosts like Johnny Carson.

There may not be as many people like Rich Little anymore, but there are many different voices in this world that want to sound like Jesus the Good Shepherd. But the difference between these false shepherds

who are called by Jesus to be thieves and bandits is not so much in what they sound like, but the real difference is in what you will hear them say.

Thieves and robbers are often also described as smooth talkers. Their voice may be as soothing as a gentle shepherd, but, they are crafty like Satan. The main difference between thieves and robbers compared to Jesus is that they have nothing to give to you. When they are guarding the gate, they are asking to take something from you before you receive anything in return. Religious leaders or false shepherds still speak the same way today. They use soft words such as forgiveness will be offered to you. They will tell you that all you must do is accept the gift they have and if you do, your life will be changed. What they must give always comes with a condition. The Pharisees had believed that they were the gatekeepers of eternal life. The words they spoke were commands that could never be kept, and it was only by what you did that gained your entrance into the sheepfold.

We have some understanding of the purpose of gates today even if very few of us have sheep to take care of anymore. If you have reached a stage in your life where you don't want to deal with people you don't know, you might move into what we know as a gated community. If you live in a house with a long flight of stairs and have infants crawling around, you will probably be purchasing a child gate to protect them from harm. If you want your pets to have some freedom to roam around in your backyard, you will put up a fence with a gate to keep them in and to let them out. And of course, before you board a plane heading to your destination, you must find the gate in the airport that you must pass through before boarding your plane. While most of these gates are for your protection, none of them come without a cost.

I have never gone to any airport where the gatekeeper has looked at me and said, "Randall Questad, we are so glad to see you. You can come right in. And by the way, your ticket to your destination has been paid in full by someone else."

Instead, before you pass through the gate at the terminal you need to pass through a couple other gates before you even see the airplane you will be flying on. You will have to show some identification that will match the ticket that you have purchased when you check in your bags. Then you will have to pass through another gate while an X-ray machine looks through the bags that you plan to take on the plane and make sure you aren't bringing anything they don't want on the plane. Then finally, you will have to go through another gate to show proof that you are the one who paid for the ticket for where you plan to go. All along the way, people are asking to get something from you before you can pass through the gate that gives you access to where you want to go.

Jesus, who is the gate of the sheepfold is not a taker, but a giver. You can tell this by what he says. In your baptism, he speaks to you and gives a new name that will never be forgotten. Every time you receive the Lord's Supper you will hear that this is body and blood that was given to you. Jesus has given his life so that you may not just have a good life, but you will be given abundant life. Jesus gives and gives unconditionally.

We can be thankful that we have a Good Shepherd who is a giver. Jesus remembers us by name, forgives our sins and gives us the assurance that we will be protected and provided for in this life and we have the certainty that we will dwell in the house of the Lord, the one and only Good Shepherd, forever. Amen