

I Am the Gate

We've been considering the names of Jesus and the various relationships those names imply. This morning we look at a name found in John's gospel where Jesus talks of sheep and shepherds. In two weeks we'll reflect on Jesus the Good Shepherd. This morning I want to look at a different name for Jesus when he says, "I am the gate." Jesus refers to the gate to the sheep pen. Sheep owner kept their sheep in a pen close to their house. At the entrance was a gate. It was the only way in or out of the pen. When the shepherds were out in the field they would build sheep pens out of stacked stones. Then they would sleep in the opening to guard the sheep. In that way they themselves were the gate. Now let's read the passage.

"Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:1-10).

Jesus is concerned that God's people are being led by false shepherds, men who are not really shepherds at all but thieves and robbers. Their only interest in the sheep is a self-interest and they do not truly care for the sheep. He says, the way to know if a shepherd is good and true is if he comes through the gate, which Jesus says is himself. To understand Jesus it will help to look at the larger context of this passage that includes the story in the previous chapter John 9. It is a story of a blind man and scene 1 might be titled, "The Healing."

"As Jesus went along he saw a man blind from birth." Jesus miraculously heals this man. He spits in the dirt, makes a little mud and then puts it on the man's eyes. Jesus then sends the man to the pool of Siloam to wash off the mud. The man washes off the mud and suddenly, for the first time in his life, he can see. Imagine how this man must have felt: to see for the first time in his life. His friends and neighbors are stunned! *Isn't this the ole blind beggar?*" *Oh, no, no it couldn't be. It just looks like him.*" But the previously blind man interrupts. *No, I am the man!* *Well, how did it happen?*" *Well, I'm not real sure actually. The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes and then sent me to wash it off. When I opened my eyes again, I could see!"*

They immediately take the man to the Pharisees. Why? Well, this was so remarkable, so unbelievable, obviously God had to be involved in some way. Perhaps this Jesus was a prophet. The Pharisees are our spiritual shepherds; if anyone can understand this strange event they can; they will explain it to us. Scene 2, "The Investigation."

How did the Pharisees respond to this amazing occurrence? They were the shepherds of God's people; they cared for God's flock. One would think seeing one of their flock healed of blindness would be an occasion of great joy and celebration. Was it? Quite the opposite! They were very suspicious of the story. First of all, this man had been healed on the Sabbath. That's not right. Anyone with such a callous disregard for our law and our traditions to violate our sacred Sabbath, must obviously be a sinner. Here the Pharisees make their first mistake. They chose to judge Jesus by their traditions and their interpretations of the Law, rather than judge their traditions and interpretations by Jesus. It's not an uncommon problem for those who seek to lead God's people. We must always be careful not to let what we believe about God be more important to us than God, so that if God himself tried to tell us something different we would not hear.

Well, suddenly a debate broke out among the Pharisees. *"Wait a minute. How can a sinner do such miraculous signs?"* An argument follows and they finally turn back to the man to get some answers. *"What do you say, it was your eyes he opened?"* The man responds, *"He is a prophet!"* Here is an insight into the character of these Pharisees. They're willing to deny even a miracle that God had done if it was not consistent with how they think God acts. "The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind." More than that, these "shepherds" of God's people were willing to sacrifice one of their sheep on the altar of their orthodoxy. Scene III, "Next Witness."

The Pharisees ask that the parents be brought in and they proceed to interrogate them. *Is this your son, the one who says he was born blind? How is it that he can see?* Now these parents aren't stupid. They understand they are in a real dilemma.

They know these leaders reject Jesus, and if they tell the truth they will likely be kicked out of the synagogue. Here's another indication of the character of these shepherds. They are leaders who lead by fear, intimidation and accusation. So the parents answer in a way to protect themselves. *Yes, he is our son. Yes, he was born blind. How? We don't know; you'll have to ask him.* What a great set of parents. Thanks a lot Dad! Failing to get the answers they wanted from the parents they cross-examine the boy again. *Give glory to God! We know this man's a sinner.* In other words: "Quit lying, the scam's over, Jesus can't possibly heal. That would be a violation of our teaching. Fess up, tell the truth, we'll give you one more chance."

Now comes what is surely one of the most courageous scenes in scripture. He knows the consequences of his answers. He knows what these powerful people can do to him. He knows the exile and humiliation of being thrown out of the synagogue. And yet, he answers with confidence and boldness. "Sinner? Well, I wouldn't know about that. You guys are the experts on sin. All I know is this. *I was blind but now I see!*" "Wow! Here is a precious principle in this story. *There are some who love a God they have put together in their own image; there are others who love the God who has put them together in his.*

Scene IV, "The Verdict." The Pharisees increase the intensity of their cross examination. *Tell us again. How did he do this? "I told you. Why again? Do you want to be his disciples too?"* Don't you just love this guy! The Pharisees blow a gasket!! *You are his disciple, we are the disciples of Moses! We know God spoke to Moses, we don't even know where this man is from.*" Now comes one of the great come backs in scripture. This man brilliantly exposes the Pharisees for what they

really are. *“Now that is remarkable! You don’t know where he comes from yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing”* (9: 30-33).

The Pharisees quickly give their own eloquent and reasoned response. *“How dare you lecture us!”* And promptly they throw him out of the synagogue. Again we see these shepherds of God’s people for what they really are, filled with their own importance, empty of any compassion for people. They use their power to intimidate people, assassinate character and eliminate dissenters. Scene V: *“After the Verdict.”*

It was a grand moment in many ways, this beggar standing alone against the Pharisees. It reminds me of Jimmy Stewart standing against the corrupt politicians in Washington in *“Mr. Smith Goes to Washington”* or Atticus Finch standing up to the racist jurors in *“To Kill a Mockingbird.”* Its inspiring, gets your blood pumping. But reality sets in. (You might remember, despite Atticus’ eloquent defense, the verdict came in guilty.) At this point Jesus re-enters the story and in Jesus we see a poignant contrast to these Pharisees. He hears that the man has been thrown out of synagogue. He knows the pain, the shame, the humiliation, the confusion that comes inevitably to one who has been rejected by the community he has grown up in. He knows the questions that must be going through this man’s head.

Despite the man’s bravery, he must be wondering. What is true? Who is true? I told the truth and my teachers rejected me. They don’t care about truth or me, only themselves and their traditions. What will I do now? Who can I turn to now? How many people, whose passion to follow Jesus has led them away from the traditions

and interpretations of their religious heritage, have been similarly cast out, confused and alone. The Pharisees threw the man out, because he wasn't worth keeping. Jesus searched him out, because he was too precious to lose. To the Pharisees he was an unruly sheep that had to be sacrificed. To Jesus he was a lost sheep that had to be found. Now, the moving and tender final scene: "A Blind Man Sees Twice."

Jesus asks the man, "*Do you believe in the Son of Man?*" He responds, "*I don't know, who is he? Tell me. I want to believe?*" Jesus looks in his eyes and says, "You're looking at him." The man, surely moved, says, "*Lord, I believe.*" Imagine, that morning he awoke a blind beggar whose eyes had never seen a sunrise. By the end of the day he looked into the eyes of his Messiah, his own eyes awash in the glory of the Son of Man. Jesus assures him that losing these Pharisees is no great loss. They know nothing about helping blind people to see. Young man you are the one who can see, not these men. "*For judgement I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.*" Well, apparently there were still some Pharisees close by and they didn't take too well to Jesus' statement. "*What? Are we blind too?*" Jesus gives his own classic comeback. "*If you were blind you wouldn't be guilty, but since you claim you can see, your guilt remains.*"

Now we see the meaning of chapter 10 where Jesus talks about shepherds, sheep, thieves and a gate. He compares himself to a good shepherd and the Pharisees to thieves, robbers or even hired hands who don't really have the interests of the sheep at heart. His words echo Ezekiel's condemnation of the false shepherds in his day. "*Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? ...You have not strengthened the weak or healed the*

sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd... and no one searched or looked for them."

In contrast Jesus says a true shepherd is dedicated to protecting the life of his sheep, even if it means laying down his life for the sheep. A true shepherd doesn't throw his sheep out of the synagogue; he leads them out to greener pastures. A true shepherd's voice doesn't intimidate the sheep and make them run away, no, the sheep know his voice and run to it and follow. A true shepherd doesn't exploit his sheep to make himself greater, rather his desire is to give his sheep life, and life abundant.

So, how do you know a true shepherd? *"I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep... I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep"* (John 10:1, 7). True shepherds come through the gate, false shepherds climb over the fence. Jesus says, I AM the Gate! True shepherds recognize me; they do not reject me. You will know the true shepherds of God's people by their relationship to me.

What does all this mean to us? What does the name "gate" say about our relationship with Christ? In one sense it's meaning is similar to Jesus being the Way. Jesus is exclusively the way to God and salvation. "No one comes to the Father except by me." The apostles would preach later, "There is no other name by which men can be saved." Next week Kenneth will probably speak more in this. He teaches on Jesus as "The Way, Truth and Life." Today I'm looking at what this passage says about how a relationship with Jesus (or lack of it) affects shepherds and their flocks.

Jesus says the way to know a true shepherd of God's flock is that he come through the gate, Jesus. Jesus must be more important than opinions, traditions, interpretations and institutions. The true shepherd is not the smartest, the wealthiest, the most popular, or most influential; he is not even the most correct! He is the one who comes to the sheep... *through the gate!*

In these passages Jesus is showing the consequences of having an institutional faith but no personal faith. An institution is "an established practice of custom." The faith of the Jews had many institutional elements to it: the worship of the synagogue, the rituals and feasts, the leadership roles in the synagogue and in the temple, the reading and interpreting of scripture by the rabbis, and on and on the list could go. All are important to the Jewish faith; the purpose of these institutional elements was to lead people to a personal faith in God. But there is also a danger in the institutions and traditions of religion; they too easily become a substitute for God; they can become more important than God himself.

The institutions and traditions of our faith help us grow: attending worship, reading our bibles, studying the faith, doing good works, giving our money, organizing ministries and mission work, sponsoring youth camps, being involved in small groups, saying our daily prayers. All these traditions of our faith can help us grow in our relationship with the subject of our faith, Jesus. But one can be involved in such things for years and never develop a personal faith in Jesus. It is said, "Tradition is the living faith of dead men; traditionalism is the dead faith of living men." For some dead faith means a faith that is easily intimidated and driven by fear

of rejection and disapproval of others. For others dead faith means a faith that thrives on the power of running an institution and enjoying the perks of one's influence.

Institutional faith without personal faith is dead faith. It is characterized by leaders, and believers, who are more concerned about protecting the institutions of the church than the people who actually are the church, the sheep. Institutional faith places its confidence in being correct according to some leader's understanding of correctness rather than being faithful to one's own growing understanding of God. Institutional faith relies on intimidation, the fear of being put out of the community to keep people in line, rather than a community of love that holds people together.

There are many motivations to participate in the activities, traditions and institutions of church but ultimately only one is of eternal importance, to have a personal faith in Jesus himself. None of the characters in this story have personal faith; they are all, in one way or another, victims of an institutional faith that fails to recognize the presence and the work of God in Jesus. Certainly the leaders of the synagogue have no personal faith in Jesus, they have rejected him because they value their own traditions and interpretations more than Jesus. The parents of the blind man haven't yet found personal faith in Jesus; they are so intimidated by the fear of being cast out of the synagogue they fail to stand by their own son. Even the blind man who is open to following Jesus does not have personal faith in Jesus, though he is well on his way to it by the end of the story.

Jesus says, "I am the gate." If you want to know the leaders you can trust, they are the ones who come to you through me. Jesus is talking about a relationship with the shepherds of God's flock, but surely these truths apply to us all. The Church is a

priesthood of believers; we lead one another. And the basis of our relationship with one another needs to be more than what we have in common religiously, our common interpretations on this or that issue, this or that tradition, this or that interpretation. Our relationship with one other is based on our common faith in and love for Christ.

Isn't this what Paul means when he wrote "I want to know Christ." Paul knew well the traditions and institutions of his faith; circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law a Pharisee, as for zeal persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless! And yet, knowing all that, being devoted to all of that did not prevent him from persecuting Christians. His institutional and traditional faith could justify persecuting Christ himself through his people. That is the danger of having more faith in our particular brand of Christianity than Christ himself, it can make us very un-Christlike.

When Paul found personal faith in Jesus everything changed. He did not care less about the elements of his institutional faith, in some ways knowing Jesus made him care even more. But that wasn't what he wanted most to talk to people about. That wasn't how he wanted to approach people. He didn't want to convert people to his traditions, his interpretation, his institutions. That is like jumping over the fence. Paul wanted to come to people through the gate. He considered every part of his institutional faith "a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." May all of us blessed to serve as shepherds in God's flock always come to the flock through the gate. But not just those who lead. May Christ be the gate through which we come to each other who are already in the flock and to all those other sheep who have yet to be added to the flock.