

Jordan Station United Church

May 3, 2020 – 4th Sunday of Easter

Rev. Anita Spiller

Theme: Jesus is the Gate, let us rest in the garden!

Good Shepherd Sunday

(John 10:1-10)

Sermon: The Stress Flower.

A spiritual practice of stopping, resting in God with prayer.

Today is known as Good Shepherd Sunday and it looks at an important passage where Jesus describes himself saying “very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.” Beautiful imagery for an amazing spring day. The Gospel of John chapter 10 verses 1-5 offers us a cast of characters including a shepherd, sheep, thieves, bandits, a gatekeeper, strangers, and yes, even the gate.

Preacher and Theologian Karoline Lewis, calls it “intriguing metaphors that describe the stealth entrance into sheepfolds, knowing the voice of another, being someone’s own, and having your name called.” Misunderstanding is a frequent reaction to Jesus to which Jesus typically responds with an invitation toward a deeper level of engagement. Often telling stories and using metaphors like this one when he refers to himself as a gate or door. For example, let’s take Jesus as the door, translated “gate” here because that better fits the pastoral scene. Twice Jesus claims, “I AM the gate” which will be the same for the good shepherd later in the story. Anytime Jesus begins with the statement “I am” you may be nudged to remember when Jesus says “I am the Light of the World.” I am statements are powerful and hold important meaning!

The image of the gate draws on the notion that there is both an inside and outside as was first articulated in chapter 9 with the blind man being thrown out and laying outside the gate of the rich man.

The thieves and bandits return as persons, like the stranger, whom the sheep do not know and to whom they will not listen. Each of these set of characters, the thieves, the bandits, and the strangers are the opposite of Jesus who is known. Jesus repeats “I AM the gate” in verse 9, giving more specificity to what it means that he is the gate for the sheep. Whoever enters, presumably the sheepfold, through him will be saved, will be able to go in and out and find pasture.

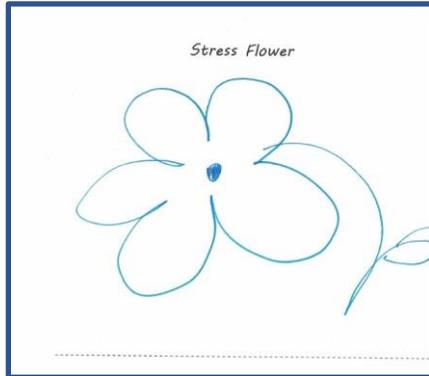
Although easily overlooked, it is Jesus as the gate that first offers us salvation. The salvation in John 10:9 is linked to the promise of pasture and protection (in and out of the sheep pen) means that we can know sustenance and security. For the disciples overhearing Jesus' words, that which is for one person, like the blind man is for every disciple, every believer. The basic needs of life, food, water, shelter, intimacy, Jesus offers, the tangible grace, at the bosom of the Father.

This is a beautiful image isn't it? Especially in times of a world wide pandemic when many are terrified of not having the basic needs of life. When food shortages abound, when rent is due and folks are worried about losing their homes. When so many have lost jobs and there seems to be little hope for the future. It is today that we must look towards Jesus and the place of peace and salvation that he promises us. We must not rush forward although we may want to push ahead to the next part of John's Gospel when Jesus is describes as our shepherd. Today we must focus on the gate.

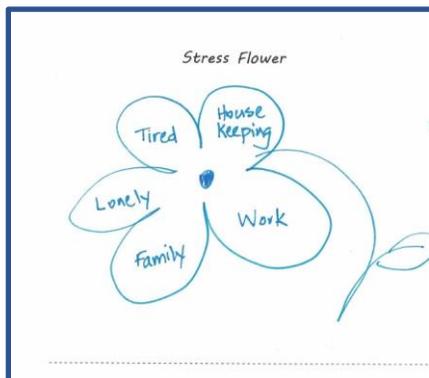
I heard it once said that fences make for good neighbours . . . fences make for good relationships with neighbours. Boundaries are important . . . both physical and spiritual. I suspect that your boundaries are being tested right now. I know that mine certainly are. My husband and I are both trying to work from home and our schedules are incredibly demanding and different. Video conference calls, phone calls and times needed to write in silence. Add in my Mom who needs and deserves her own space and our beloved dog that is in heaven because everyone is home all the time and so expects attention all the time. It can make for some crazy days.

Last week, a colleague of mine invited me to yet another Zoom call to reflect on these pandemic times and tips on how to avoid burnout. I went begrudgingly. I went because she asked me. Shelley Pavlik who is a counsellor in Kitchener, hosted the session and offered some wise advice that I want to share with you now. Shelley said that the first step to overcoming stress is to acknowledge the stress. For me it was recognizing that there needs to be boundaries and the gate that lies between. The gate that opens up a threshold between being afraid and being free.

She showed us this Stress Flower:



Then she encouraged us to name the things in our life that are causing us stress. She gave these examples:



Mine were similar with the addition of technology and the physical distance I must keep from all of you. When someone is sick or dying, my calling from God is to run toward you, not stay away. I find this to be incredibly stressful.

Then Shelley said . . .to leave it there on the table where you drew it and walk away. There is something about the human mind she said that allows us to let things go once we have written them down. They lose their power once we say them out loud. It seems simple...perhaps too simple.

For me it was an exercise that helped me to stop. To take some time and listen to my thoughts, feel what was causing my heart to ache and to breathe. A wonderful thing happened, in the silence, in the reflection, in the time away, I remembered that Jesus is there with me. Jesus is the gate, welcoming me to a place where there is peace right here on earth. It was a reminder that I am often too busy running around with the other stressed out sheep that I forget to listen for Jesus. For me, it was a chance to know the voice of another, to be reminded that I belong to Jesus. It was a time to be still and have my name called." I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. I think that

today's Gospel is a chance for us to remember that we can have heaven on earth. We can be saved right now. We have the freedom to come in and go out and find pasture. My prayer for this week is that you will slow down and look for the pasture. That you will focus on Jesus as your gate. That you will be still long enough to hear your name being called. You are God's beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen