

Fourth Sunday of Easter

THE “GATED” COMMUNITY

John 10:1-10

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

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. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

DIAGNOSIS: Vulnerable Life

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Beware of Strangers (v. 5)*

The problem presented at the outset of this Good Shepherd

chapter seems obvious: The gospel writer feels the need to guard his community against pretenders who claim to preach Christ, but whose message is a lightly-veiled version of Moses (call it “law lite,” if you’d like). These pretenders (“thieves and bandits,” in John’s words, v. 1) don’t use the direct route to get their message across; they are not straightforward about their intentions. So John’s community needs to be vigilant in distinguishing the preaching of Christ crucified from this crafty preaching of a kinder, gentler Moses.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Uncomprehending* (v. 6)

And if vigilance were the only challenge, the rest of this passage would not need to be written. But, despite John’s best efforts, the warning does not seem to have been sinking in with believers (“they did not understand,” v. 6). Listeners in the community have not noticed the difference between the “you must” of the thieves and bandits, and the “you may” of the Christian community. [And a subtle and sometimes elusive distinction it can be.]

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Unwelcomed—Worse, Destroyed*

But the end of “not understanding,” is not just ignorance. As John indicates the end for listeners who are led astray is that the thieves have come in to steal them away from their Shepherd, to kill and destroy them (v. 10). And that outcome would be bad enough; but worse is that these naïve listeners have been yanked away from the very One who has the power to save them. No Savior, no salvation.

PROGNOSIS: Abundant Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Gate*

But what if the very One who has the power to shut out thieves and bandits (and their naïve followers), that is, what if the

Gate (v. 9), also opens himself up for (that is, sacrifices himself) to welcome in the very uncomprehending listeners to whom he speaks? That is precisely what Jesus (John calls him by many names here: Gate, Shepherd, Savior) does: He makes himself vulnerable to the wiles of humanity, in order to save the same. Talk about incomprehensible! Talk about divine (and vulnerably human) intervention! Jesus puts himself between the devil, the law, and all the other thieves and bandits that would do in his sheep. And he doesn't take the easy route to do it; instead, he goes straight through Jerusalem, up Pilate's steps, and onto Golgotha to die; that's the direct route that distinguishes this Shepherd from the pretenders. The other clarion characteristic of this Shepherd is his voice; when he speaks, his sheep know his voice—because his words get personal (v. 3, he calls his sheep by name): “I hold the power of salvation,” this Shepherd declares, “and I've written your name on it.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Gated Community*
The One who calls his sheep by name, does not leave his sheep to stand idly or to wander without purpose; nor does he lock his sheep inside the fold in order to guard them against the dangers of the pasture. Instead, he goes ahead of them (v. 3), opening the way for them to listen for his voice in- and outside the community. This is no barred and chained community in which insiders only feel secure when strangers are outside and they are locked inside; this community is “gated” by Jesus alone; he is the One who gives his sheep freedom to “come in and go out” (v. 9), and he is the One who determines who to let in and who to keep out. [Later in this same chapter Jesus will allude to “other sheep,” about whose faith in Jesus' the gospel writer may have been uncertain. What John is clear about is that Jesus is the Gate/Shepherd who saves, and his voice is the one to listen for.]

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Abundant Life*

Abundant life can't be contained. Just as Jesus' blood flowed freely from the cross to forgive sinners and would-be-righteous people alike, so the abundant life that comes from him overflows. So the abundant life that flows into the "gated" community of Christ, also flows out. This abundant life is not the exclusive right of those who are sheltered by the Shepherd; nor can it remain abundant if the community keeps it to itself. But one thing is certain: The Gate is the means by which the community finds abundance (the freedom to come in and go out), and there is enough abundance to invite others to come in by the Gate and share it. No need to seek indirect routes: hurtling the walls of the law, or slipping under the law's radar. This Gate opens himself up without a moan, to welcome in all who would enter by him.