

## EASTER FOUR, YEAR A, APRIL 20, 2023

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday a day when we recognize that Jesus is the ultimate nurturing shepherd who tells us every person counts and no one is better than another. Jesus also says in this gospel that he is the gate for the sheep. What exactly does that mean that Jesus is the gate?

Notice the gospel does not say, "I am the wall, the barrier, the enclosure, the dividing line." Jesus does not say, "I am that which separates, isolates and segregates." What he does say is, "I am the gate, The door. The opening. The passageway. The place where freedom begins.

Now most of us don't associate "gates" with freedom. We think of bars and locks and alarms and enclosures. We imagine toddler gates or puppy training gates, prison gates and "gated communities." But what if Jesus is a different kind of gate? A gate that opens out instead of closing in. Instead of being a barrier, Jesus is the opening in it. Jesus is a place of release, movement, spaciousness and liberty.

In fact, this passage is not about the self-protective walls we like to build and hide behind as this passage has often been interpreted. Remember, Jesus is the gate. We're not. Gate-keeping is not our job. Rather it's about life. Life that pushes across formidable boundaries and flourishes in precarious places and never denies the real threat of thieves and bandits yet holds out the possibility of nourishment, protection, and rest. It's about life that perseveres and reaches through any opening it can find, however small, however fragile, however tenuous, and insists on generous self-giving.

Maybe the questions we need to ask about this passage are; "What is it in me that resists the open gate? Where in my life am I walled off, closed to change, averse to movement, risk, freedom, joy? What flock do I belong to, and whose voice do I follow most readily? What calls to me, making seductive promises I shouldn't trust? Do I know the shepherd well enough to recognize his call? Am I willing to leave the fold in order to follow him or am I too complacent, scared, suspicious, and jaded to pursue abundant life?

How can we truly discern when we are hearing God's voice? How do we know when we really hear Jesus' voice? How do you know which is the right voice that moves us out of the gate of our own prejudices and fears into God's world of grace, love and possibilities.

Let me tell you a you a story about the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It was right after the Apartheid government had been dismantled and Tutu was made co-chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This commission was based on a God oriented reality that there is no future without forgiveness in the life of an individual, a relationship, a system, a government or in the life of the world. The process was to invite everyone who had been a victim of apartheid oppression or a perpetrator of apartheid violence to give testimony with full disclosure and then receive amnesty so they could move into the future.

Well amnesty is a hard pill to swallow if you believe God is not a God of compassion or that God needs to be paid off in order for God to forgive. But Bishop Tutu persevered and there were bumps in the road and they finally reached an impasse over the issue of amnesty. Tutu decided to take them on a three day retreat and he took them on a boat to Robin Island which originally had been a leper colony and then

for the last 30 years had been a place to imprison political prisoners – including Nelson Mandela.

They had dinner that evening and the next morning after breakfast he told them it was going to be a day of silence because they needed to be quiet so they could hear God's voice. He gave them some tips about meditation so they could quiet their minds and hear God's voice. He even told those with no belief that it would be good for them too to be silent and quiet the mind and listen for that voice because in the desert when you are alone you learn to depend on your creator and that's what this commission needed to do at this impasse.

They scattered over the island to different places the coast, the chapel for the lepers – the lime pits that Nelson Mandela worked at to listen for the voice of God. At sunset Tutu broke the silence and asked each one did they hear God's voice and to share what they heard. Someone remarked how God made me realize how we need one another and that we are a family. Another said there were aware of the awesome responsibility of truth and reconciliation as Jesus did. Another said they were aware of thousands of people praying for them. Another remarked that God made me understand the great responsibility we have towards each other in the human race. Last to go was a woman trained as an Opera singer who had gone to the lime pits. She quietly got up and sang "Were you there – have you heard they accused him of a crime – were you there when they shoved him in the lime. Bishop Tutu finally led them in prayer and a participant said the presence of God was with us. God had spoken and the peace of God was with us. And then with that famous twinkle in his eye, Tutu announced, "Well that's that and now off to the bar.

As the participant who told the story said, we still had not addressed or settled our impasses. He wondered what was going to happen with the issue of amnesty since for many it was a big pill to swallow. He wondered if they would ever see eye to eye. The next morning Bishop Tutu announced that the boat would come for them at 1 pm and they would gather after breakfast. When they gathered at 9am Bishop Tutu finally introduced the matter of amnesty and within less than a half an hour everyone agreed to amnesty. How was that possible? Had the voice of God resonated with all of them? Did the voice of God have a distinct message? Obviously it did.

But it does beg the question, what happens when you think you hear the voice of God and how do you perceive that you are receiving the right message and what are the hallmarks for hearing God's voice?

Let me first say what God's voice isn't. It isn't a voice of hatred, intolerance, exclusivity, degradation, violence, fear, anger, rage, abuse, revenge, criticism, judgment or anything related to negativity. To help hear God's voice I believe these four benchmarks will help. First, Jesus knew the human condition is to have competing priorities and values that is why he told us to seek first the kingdom of God which is justice. If you seek justice first– then all these other things will fall into place. Bishop Tutu said he always knows when he hears the voice of God because the voice of God tells him to stand by those who are always getting it in the neck by injustice and oppression and to always be on the side of peace not violence and revenge. Whenever you stand with justice you will stand in deep alignment with God's love and peace.

Secondly, it is important to remember what Jesus said about our enemies. It's not about an eye for an eye it is about loving your enemy and praying for those who

persecute you so you may be children of God. The essence of this message is that the truth is we belong to one another and no one stands outside the circle of God's compassion. There is no us versus them.

Third, try to discern the voice of God through a litmus test which resonates in what Jesus said. The way you judge a tree is by the fruit it bears. In the end your intention of your acts are not as important as the fruit of your acts. The acts of fear are obvious; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions. But the acts of the fruits of love are love, joy peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.

Fourth, Jesus was asked by a lawyer to sum up the law and Jesus responded "Love the lord your God will all your being, and the second is like it love your neighbor. The voice of the Good Shepherd calls us to follow him, to follow a path of self-giving love. Such love does not see the color of someone's skin, or their religion or their social status. It just sees another human being, a creation of God, who is our brother and sister.

Finally, remember Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls to us that we may have life, and have it abundantly. It's not an exclusive call. It is extended throughout the universe, knowing no boundaries of space or time, person or place, creature or creation.

We are the voice of Christ in the world today. What people know of God's grace, they learn from us; what people know of God's forgiveness, they hear from us; what people know of God's love, they receive from us. The shepherd calls. Listen carefully for it is a voice of love, forgiveness, grace and abundant life. Anything else is just a voice shouting in the wind. Amen.