

On this fourth Sunday of Easter, sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday, today's assigned text is fittingly from the Gospel of John. Like John does throughout his gospel he uses elaborate metaphors and imagery in describing Christ. We've seen in John elsewhere where Jesus uses the “I am” sayings in describing himself, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” “I am the way, the truth, and the life... no one comes to the Father except through me.” Do any of these sayings sound familiar? Well today we have another “I am” saying from Jesus where he likens himself to a shepherd and a gate, or a “door” that leads to God. Jesus says that he is the shepherd who has the best interest of the sheep in mind. While in the sheep pen the sheep who are together in the sheepfold are threatened by thieves and outlaws. They climb in over the walls to cause trouble, while others come into the sheep pen to be with the flock through the gateway, or in other translations, “the door.” In all honesty, I really love that John reminds us in verse 6, “that those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying.” I love this verse, because I feel a little less alone in trying to understand what Jesus is getting at. Even though Jesus makes it clear that he is the door in nearly every single verse this morning, I still find it difficult to understand how he is like a door, how I am a sheep, and who the thieves are.

In order to understand Jesus, we have to understand the thing he says he is like. What is the purpose of a door? Is it a means of entering or a means of exiting? Are doors built to keep things from coming in, or are they designed to keep things from getting out? Is the purpose of the door to keep people out or to welcome people in? Take for instance, our church doors. What do those doors say about our church? Do they welcome people in? Who have they welcomed in? For the most part, they look inviting, but we use the side entrance more often at Bethel than we do the main entryway into the sanctuary. Not that that's a bad thing, I think it just says we don't like walking up steps, or can't. Or at Monticello, we use one entryway of four, whereas at one

time those doorways, like many antiquated southern churches, were designed to segregate gender and race when being welcomed into the sanctuary. So, I ask again, but in the context of today, during this pandemic, what do church doors being closed say about our church?

As Duke Divinity Professor and former Bishop of Alabama, Rev. Dr. Will Willimon admits when going to do visitations at the hospital, I also agree it is always an interesting feeling when walking up to a member's door. For me there's always this awkward, anxiousness that comes over me on the elevator ride when I'm contemplating my entrance. How should I enter if the door is closed? How will I enter if the door is open? There is always a relief when I find that the door is open, because that usually means they're awake and ready for a visitor. Whereas, if I find that the door is closed, who knows what is going on in there. They may be getting dressed, or getting a sponge bath, or sleeping after a serious surgery and I will have to wait. Or it could mean that they're so sick that visitations aren't aloud, or that I have to enter in wearing appropriate hospital gear left outside their door before being allowed to enter.

When quarantine first began, nearly two months ago, I decided a sermon delivery was the best option to get church to you. With the help from the Glass's, John, Darlene, and I made our way to your homes and mailboxes to make life feel a tad bit normal under the overwhelming new circumstances. I can't speak for John and Darlene, but for me, some of you were a little more wary than I was, and rightly so. I'd knock on your door, because finding your mailbox was an adventure all in its own, and after ringing the doorbell a few times that I thought for sure didn't work, standing there I'd hear movement from inside and hear the door come alive. As you unlocked the door and cautiously opened it and peeked through the smallest crack, so as to not let any air inside, I'd hear your voice ask, “Who is it?” And after responding with my name, you

asked again, “Who?” It was only after saying the words, “it’s your pastor,” and then calling you by your name that your doorway found its way fully open and accepting of the coronavirus air.

What does it mean for Jesus to say to us, “I assure you that I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the door. Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and got out and find pasture.” (John 10:7-10). One way to understand Jesus, when he says, “I am the door,” is not the physical door, but what the door represents. The door is a passageway into the house, not the house. The door is the walkway, the threshold, into the dwelling place. When Jesus says, “I am the door,” he is saying, “I am the way.” “I am the way...” to God, to green pastures, to abundance, to salvation. Therefore, Jesus is the means through which we get to God. Or as Rev. Dr. Will Willimon puts it better, “maybe the traffic is moving in the other direction, with Jesus. Maybe Jesus is better thought of as the way God gets to us.” And perhaps that is exactly what we need to hear this morning. Our doors and our church doors are closed this morning, but the gate is wide open; Jesus’ door is wide open, ready to receive all who come through him into his flock. And those who are a part of his care will find salvation and be lead into greener pastures.

In the backyard of the parsonage, there is a fenced in area with a gate. It seems such a simple analogy when I stand inside the four walls of that fence, looking at that gate. It makes perfect sense, Jesus is the Good Shepherd at the gate entrance, keeping an eye on me, one of his sheep inside his flock. The only way I could’ve entered inside was through him and his calling out to me to come in. Of course, like Jesus said, there will be some who scale the walls to get inside, but they enter so that they can steal, kill, and destroy. They deceitfully enter through the basement window and try to disarm our alarms and attempt to persuade us into giving up the treasures in our safe, and after we pay up nothing the thief goes to kidnapping us, but we won’t

go. Like Jesus says, “the sheep didn’t listen to the thief. They follow the shepherd’s voice.”

Those who enter into the sheepfold only to steal, kill, and destroy remind me of thieves like Dylann Roof. The 21-year-old who deliberately drove down from Shelby, North Carolina to the then senior pastor, and state senator, Clementa C. Pinckney’s Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The white supremacist, who intentionally walked through open church doors, sat in on an hour-long bible study before he proceeded to steal, kill, and destroy lives that were to him targets because of the church’s history and importance.

While that may be an extreme example of thievery, there are still those in our lives that continue to cunningly scale into the sheepfold and steal, kill, and destroy the life from us. In these anxious times of quarantine, we the flock, feel more susceptible to being snatched up by their deception than ever before. More than ever we feel more out in the open, wandering alone, out of place, out of sync, and far from being close to God and the Good Shepherd’s call. What are we then to do when the church doors are closed? When our neighbors’ doors are closed? Like Jesus said, Follow my voice. I am the door. Enter through me and I will keep you safe. I’ve come to call you into the sheepfold so that you could have abundant life. A life so excessive, so immeasurable that it is more than you could ever anticipate or imagine. That is the kind of life Jesus brings when we hear his calling and enter his doorway. Once inside it is more than we could ever fathom, and as the Psalmist, David, says we don’t want for anything because God is there leading us beside still waters, leading us in right paths, making us lie down in green pastures, and restoring our soul. So, what do we have to fear?

Certainly not closed doors, because the Good Shepherd has them wide open. Certainly not death, because the Good Shepherd is there with life in abundance. And certainly not

loneliness or isolation or quarantine, because God, the Good Shepherd is here with us leading us onward and calling our name, if we only listen and follow his voice. Amen.