Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

Easter 4A 2017, Good Shepherd Sunday

May 7, 2017

John 10: 1-10

 This is Good Shepherd Sunday. The Good Shepherd is a sweet image--filled with a sense of being cared for and being known in a particular way. Even those of us who don't have much contact with real sheep and shepherds resonate with this image. In a lot of people, the Good Shepherd is an image that brings with it lots of warm and fuzzy feelings.

 But in the Gospel reading today there's another image that Jesus uses to describe himself. "I am the gate," he says.

 "Good Gate Sunday" doesn't have quite the same ring to it. And it's never going to make it on to a poster--can you picture it--Jesus lying on his side, swinging back and forth, surrounded by sheep moving on through. The picture of Jesus as the Good Shepherd is sweet. The picture of Jesus as the Good Gate is downright comical. (A few years ago, Pr. Lee showed us how funny it looks when she performed the role of the gate in a Young People's Message.)

 Back in Jesus's day, the sheepfold was adjoining the house--kind of build out from it. And there was a separate entrance--a gate--and it was the only way to go in and out of the sheepfold.

 A gate is about movement. It's about opening and closing, so the sheep can move through. The gate opens to allow the sheep to go out to graze and get the nourishment they need. The gate also opens so the sheep can come in for the night, so they can be protected and rest in safety. The gate closes--not to keep other sheep out or restrict the freedom of the sheep--but to keep thieves and wolves and anything else that might harm the sheep out.

 The difference between a gate and a fence is that a gate moves.

 It's also good to notice that Jesus says I am the Gate, not I am the Gatekeeper. The Gatekeeper is there to keep some people or sheep out, and to let others in. That's not the job of the Gate. The Gate is what allows for movement. It's a two-direction movement through the Gate.

 I'm sure there are many ways to understand this metaphor of the Gate--what it means that Jesus is the way through. But what comes through to me most clearly is that it is the *way of Jesus--* the way of loving that doesn't hold back. That's the Gate. That's the way we move into Abundant Life.

 I had the basic idea but I started really thinking about this sermon at the beginning of the week. And I was so happy because, early on Tuesday, someone in my family who keeps me in touch with what's happening sent me Jimmy Kimmel's monologue. It was stunning and I knew it would connect right away with where I was headed with the sermon. Jimmy Kimmel is an extremely talented comedian--and I find comedians not only entertaining but fascinating. Over the years, I've listened to a fair number of interviews with comedians, and to a person, they are very sensitive and insightful. You can see this, in this now very famous monologue, where Jimmy Kimmel pours his heart out.

 If you haven't seen it, it's worth seeing. Jimmy's wife gave birth to a baby boy, Billy, who at first seemed to be perfectly fine. A short time later, a very alert nurse noticed he had a heart murmur and his color was off. Jimmy, with his voice breaking, describes what it was like going to the neonatal ICU and then in an ambulance to Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, and then through open-heart surgery on his 3 day old son. The surgery is successful--and, amazingly, 6 days after surgery, a very healthy-looking Billy goes home.

 There are two striking things--beyond how vulnerable Jimmy Kimmel is in this monologue. The first is how much time Jimmy spends thanking everyone--by name. This is no generic "thanks to everyone who was there for me"--he names a lot of people--most of them nurses and doctors.

 The second striking thing is how he moves through his heart aching experience right into connecting with the hurts and the needs of others. It is like he is walking through a gate of suffering love. First, he connects with all of the other parents at Children's Hospital whose kids are so sick--and at one point, he asks the audience to pray for all those other kids and their parents who are still there. Kimmel has financially supported Children's Hospital for years, never thinking he would be there one day with his newborn son. He encourages other people to support it as well. And he talks about how there are people there from all walks of life--all different income levels--all together in their heartache over their kids.

 Then he takes it to the next level, and talks about health care--specifically access to health care and the question of pre-existing conditions. These are his words:

 "Before 2014, if you were born with congenital heart disease like my son was, there was a good chance you'd never be able to get health insurance because you had a preexisting condition," "... And if your parents didn't have medical insurance you might not live long enough to even get denied because of a preexisting condition."

 "If your baby is going to die and it doesn't have to, it shouldn't matter how much money you make. I think that's something that if you're a Republican, Democrat, or something else we all agree on that right?"

 On Tuesday morning, Jimmy Kimmel's monologue had a 100,000 views. Now, it has almost 10 million. I think what is so compelling about it is that his suffering love is on full display--and it would be a rare person who could see that and not pay attention. Of course, this happened just a few days before the House voted on the new healthcare bill that experts say will make health insurance unaffordable for most people with pre-existing conditions. And amazingly, Kimmel's testimony was front and center, with even the president talking about passing the "Kimmel test". One writer in a piece in the Washington post said Kimmel had more impact on the debate than all the professional political commentators.

 The way I see it, he injected a clarity that comes when love is the bottom line--when you walk through the gate that is the way of Jesus--the Gate that transforms personal suffering into a wider love that connects us with each other.

 I, in no way want to glorify suffering or to say that it is a good thing. I, personally, hate it. But there is no denying that it is a big part of our human experience--and I believe that Jesus, the Gate, offers us a way through that can use our suffering to form us rather than deform us. A way that, rather than debilitating us, shapes us into people whose love is both deeper and wider.

 As I picture it, the sheepfold is the place of security--the place where we feel so safe we can actually rest. That place is in the presence of the God who loves us at all times and in all places--even the times and places when we feel distant from God. This is the "no matter what" God--no matter what you feel, no matter what you've done or not done--God is there for you. In those times when we trust that God is there for us--that God is on our side--that God loves us no matter what--in those times, we are resting in the safety of the sheepfold.

 Our suffering is like the sheep going through the Gate. It's a rough experience when all those sheep are pushing each other to squeeze through the gate. Suffering by definition is painful. But when we go through the Gate of the way of Jesus--especially when we go through that Gate well rested from being in the presence of the "no matter what" God--and we see that no-matter-whatness in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus--We can get to the other side--to the abundant life that is as wide and expansive as the pastures are for the sheep.

 That abundant life is a life filled with a sense of purpose. A life where we see ever more clearly how connected we are as human beings. A life where love expands and moves us to respond to the suffering and the hopes of others.

 An abundant life in the way of our Gate, Jesus.

Thanks be to God for our Good Gate.

Amen.