

“Show Me The Way to Go Home”

Several years ago on Good Shepherd Sunday I was preaching to a group of children and their parents. I invited the children to come to the front of the chapel and sit on the rug so that we could have a discussion about this very passage. One thing that is important for adults to be aware of is that younger children are concrete thinkers. Metaphor as a concept is not easy for them to understand. This passage uses two metaphors. I thought I had a chance with one because the compassion is fairly straightforward, but the other would be a challenge to communicate.

We started with the easier of the two when I asked them what they thought of Jesus saying, “I am the Good Shepherd.” In addition to being the simpler metaphor, many of these children took part in a faith formation program called Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Jesus as The Good Shepherd is the central theme around which the rest of the faith stories and concepts are built. When I mentioned Jesus as the Good Shepherd and asked what that means to them. They were ready to share many different thoughts and experiences that they have had. They told me that Jesus was not talking about taking care of actual sheep, but that Jesus is a shepherd to those who believe in him. They told me that Jesus the Good Shepherd cares for us feeds our souls, feeds us through communion just as a shepherd would feed sheep. They said that Jesus loves us and protects us like a shepherd. They also said that Jesus lives in our hearts.

This was all very good and quite heartening. Shepherds are people and Jesus was a person. To experience Jesus in the role of a shepherd seemed to be a concept they could grasp even if Jesus never tended sheep. But the second part of this passage uses a metaphor for Jesus that I thought might not be easy for young minds to connect with.

In the second part of that reading from John Jesus says, “I am the gate.” Now human beings can be shepherds and it is not a far stretch to say a shepherd of people cares for them the same way a shepherd of sheep cares for his flock. But how can a human be a gate? We are not gates in the literal sense. In fact, in response to this metaphor one child said, “That would be silly for Jesus to be a gate.” But I asked them to think a little more about what Jesus might mean.

To my wonderment not a second went by but that one child said, “Jesus is a gate because he keeps us close to him.” Another said, “Jesus is a gate because he protects us from bad things.” And another said, “He keeps us from wandering away.” I asked, “But what happens if we do wander away?” The immediate response was, “He comes to get us and brings us back. He does not forget us.” They were blending the metaphors of Good Shepherd and gate into

the person of Jesus. I must say I was astounded by each answer and the depth of the response that these little children were giving.

This was not the end of the discussion by any means. Indeed, I was completely blown away when one eight-year-old girl said very quietly, “Jesus opens the gate and leads us on the path to God.” I was astonished. I asked her to repeat it more loudly so that all could hear her words, but she insisted I do it for her. So I repeated her words, “Jesus opens the gate and leads us on the path to God.” There was an audible intake of breath as the adults realized the profoundness of this girl’s thoughts. As the saying goes, “Out of the mouths of babes.”¹ Her interpretation had never occurred to me. I was speechless.

For this child Jesus was so much more than the gate of protection, safety, and care. Jesus keeps the gate but also opens it and leads us out of the pen in which we are held by life, circumstance, fear, caution, and worry. Jesus keeps us safe and then when the time is right Jesus leads us out into a larger life with God.

Three years have gone by and the power of that child’s understanding and expression has not faded. My heart is deeply moved as I wonder at her thoughts again. Jesus came to lead us to God. He is not the gatekeeper as we think of that concept today. That is one who keeps people away from the important ones. Jesus is the one who opens the gate and helps us through it to meet the God of lovingkindness, generosity, abundance, and peace.

Our world today may feel topsy-turvy and truth be told that is not unusual. We live our lives in the present and the immediacy of now can overtake us. When crisis strikes as it has now with the COVID 19 pandemic we get lost in the constant change, information overload, and the way our routines have been turned upside down. Despite all of this Jesus guides us to the one thing that is constant and unwavering—God’s love for us.

Believe in it. Trust it; Put all that you have in God’s love, because God will never, ever fail you no matter what life throws at you. Commend your life to God, take refuge in the Lord, and allow Jesus, The Good Shepherd, lead you and countless others all the way home.

¹ Psalm 8:2