

“The Door” (FN: JN 10 1-11.2008)

Scripture: John 10:1-11a

William Pender

First Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, TN, 04/13/08

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

<sup>7</sup> So again Jesus said to them, *“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. <sup>11</sup> I am the good shepherd...”*

In our family growing up, there was a common saying when someone stood in the way of the television, blocking the view. So, for example, when the culprit was me, my dad would say, “William, you make a better door than a window.” In other words, he couldn’t see through me—I’m not a window—but if I would move, like a door, then he would be able to see.

That same description—you’re a better door than window—could also be applied to Jesus. He has said that he is shepherd. And even though few of us had much contact with actual shepherds, we have a basic sense of that vocation. But Jesus also says in the Scripture for today, “I am the gate,” or “I am the door of the sheep.” An odd description until we note what sort of door or gate that often served the sheepfold in ancient Palestine. A sheepfold is simply a secure enclosure for sheep: a small canyon with high walls, a cave, and sometimes even a fenced enclosure. Instead of an actual gate or door to the fold, the shepherd himself often made the gate with his body. In the evening the shepherd would round up the sheep and lead them to the single opening in the sheepfold. The shepherd would stand at this opening, counting the sheep. There was no other way in. Then to close off the opening to the enclosure, the shepherd would lie down at opening, forming the door to sheepfold. The door or gate to the sheepfold was formed by the body of the shepherd—the shepherd was the door.

Since Jesus is the door, what does that mean for his sheep? I suppose the first thing is to say is the sheep form a flock. There is an old Russian proverb that says, “Without a shepherd there is no flock.” The converse is also true: “With a shepherd, there is a flock.” There is a flock...and Jesus is the door.

Perhaps sometimes we want to define the flock of Jesus as we define a club...some like-minded people choosing to associate. Isn’t that what a club is? Like-minded...like-interested...like-connected people joining together...people who like each other. Some of you may recall the comedian Groucho Marx tilting his cigar and wisecracking, “I wouldn’t want to be part of a club that would have me as a member.” But here’s the surprise: you and I are not the door to this club—it is not our like-mindedness that gives us entry into the flock. Jesus would say later, “You did not choose me; I chose you.” And we are chosen for community. As mad and as frustrated that life in the church can be (and if you have not gotten mad or frustrated in the church, then likely you have

not been around the church very long), we are still brought together in the same fold, the same enclosure. It is not a choice but a given...sort of like family. What family does not stir up conflict, hurt, and misunderstanding? But I did not choose crazy Uncle Jesse or derelict cousin Sharon...they come with the family. And when we are the flock of Jesus Christ, he is the door. And we are chosen for community.

That is why for membership in the Presbyterian Church the most important question is whether you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Of course, there is much more to the church than simply this faith confession, that Jesus is Lord and Savior, but that is the way in. That's the entrance. And I cannot call anyone a stranger, a foreigner, an alien, who confesses that Jesus is Lord and Savior, whether they are Jeremiah Wright, Pat Roberson, or Pope Benedict.

So, first, community-life together is a given...not an option. Second, since Jesus is the door, then there is movement in and out. Jesus does not say, "I am the wall." A wall is meant to divide...a door is meant to permit movement. Jesus says that we "come in and go out and find pasture." There are two motions here.

We "come in." Come into the flock...into the sheepfold. We come into security and safety. We call this great worship space, "a sanctuary." Originally, the word "sanctuary" was related to the word "holy," but the word, "sanctuary" has come mean something else: a safe place, a secure place. When a town advertises that is it a "bird sanctuary," it means put up B-B guns and shotguns. Within those town limits, birds are safe.

We "come in" to sanctuary. Here we are brothers and sisters in faith...not management and blue-collar, not college-graduate and those with a 5<sup>th</sup> grade education, not even American and non-American. Here we are the flock of Jesus Christ.

One of the unspoken norms of this congregation is that if there is a human need, we will always seek ways to help each other because we are in the same flock. Several months ago when we gathered for the auction to raise funds for family in this church, the operative norm was this: we will respond to need. Some found that auction a helpful expression. Others said, "Let's dig a little deeper and give...we do not need to buy and sell...we just need to give." Both responses came from the same place: we will seek ways to help each other. I suppose we do not say that out loud because we are afraid we will get taken advantaged of...that once you help someone in need, they become dependent on the help. But all the same, we are committed to assisting each other in need. We are a sanctuary, a safe place. We "come in" and we acknowledge those who are in with us.

Now is there danger in the fold, in the sanctuary? Sure there is, if we just stay in, then we have missed out on the going out and finding pasture. Jesus is the door not just for "coming in" but also for going out and finding pasture. As I said, doors are not walls...doors are meant for going out. Many a church has put a sign above the exit of their sanctuary: "We come in to worship; we go out to serve." Or, some have a sign at the exit from their parking lot: "You are entering the mission field." As wonderful as it is be together as the flock, we go out to find pasture, find our service.

I know a congregation that has declared that to be a member of the congregation means that you can always answer this question: "What is my current service to Jesus as Lord?" And it cannot be, "I come to church." It cannot be, "I am honest, law-abiding person." It cannot be, "I'll try to be nice." In order to be member, one has to be able to answer the question "What is my current

service to Jesus as Lord?” with a specific answer: I serve as a Hospice volunteer. I serve as a youth group advisor. I serve as a Stephen Minister. I serve as an offering counter. I serve as child care volunteer. I serve as a committee member. I serve as a “neighborhood prayer” (one person answered the question by saying, she walked her neighborhood and prayed for each home on a regular and scheduled basis). I serve with presbytery. I serve on the United Way Board. In other words, you can identify something in your life that is motivated and just required of you because you are servant of Jesus Christ.

What is my current service to Jesus as Lord? That service certainly can change...should change...but always be answerable with a specific answer. And if you do not cannot answer the question? Ask other members of the flock. Ask your church staff...we have lots of ideas of what could be done...needs to be done. And just pay attention! There is some need, some service, some pasture that is just for you. I can't tell you the number of times that people have told me, “Some need just caught my heart and I stepped up to serve.” Sometimes people have stepped up because they have found they have been touched. Sometimes people have stepped up because they were frustrated. Frustration is not always bad...it may be the signal as to where the best pasture is for you.

Is there a danger in the pasture? Yes, there is. When asked how a sheep gets lost, one shepherd responded by saying, “One nibble at a time.” Sheep get lost one nibble at a time—nibble here, there, and further away, and soon they are far removed from the flock and the fold.

Our life, says Jesus, is found in the coming in and going out to find pasture. So he says, “I am the door.” Like the ocean tide coming in and going out, the fullness of Christian life is found in this pattern of entering and departing. Along the coast there are salt water marshes which teem with life, with shrimp, fish, crabs, birds, and grasses and vegetation. The life in such a marsh is dependent on the ebb and flow of tide. Without low tide and high tide, the marsh would stagnate—both plants and animals would die. Marsh life is dependent upon the continually flow of the tide: it must come in and go out for life to flourish. Jesus said, “I am the door.” It is in the coming in and the going out that life flourishes.

So, first, we are made for community in Christ. Since Jesus is the door, you will be in the flock...not a choice. And second, we are made for both coming in and going out...can't stay in...can't stay out. The movement is key. Now if there were a traditional sermon with three points, you would be expecting a third point right now. And if I preached as long as one my distinguished predecessors did, James Park did, then I would go on. I'm told he was clocked at hour on his sermons and 15 minutes on his prayers...I think he must have missed the memo about being through with worship at noon. And to think that many people long for the “good old days.” Let's stop with two points today.

Jesus is the door: we come into his flock, his community, his sheepfold and we find our life in that movement of coming in and going out.