

Lay Preaching Practice

2/17/19

5/12/19

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Happy Mother's Day!

The Good Shepherd

John Ch 10, v 7-10: Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

Initially when I read this it just seemed like good news. If I know the voice of Jesus, and I am a good follower, I will be led to salvation. It's not easy to remember to listen for the voice of Jesus and I'm easily distracted. But I go to church and I know a little about the bible so at least i'm on the right track.

This way of thinking about Christianity and faith also dovetails well with the basis of my spirituality, what brought me back to church as an adult. I became and continue to be certain that in this life there is light and darkness, there is good and evil. And if I pay attention I can

pretty confidently know which is a thief and which is a gift. If I tune in I can tell which is love and light and which is hatred and darkness. And they both exist in this world.

As a substance abuse counselor I daily see how street drugs are thieves. The places people go to feed their addiction are full of bandits. There is no abundant life through untreated addiction, and there is often death.

Contrast this with St Andrews, which for me, is always full of light. Being a member, attending services doesn't mean we will live forever, but I can without hesitation say that this is a Good place. Maybe even, a gate to an abundant life.

So that is all good. Easy breezy. But as I looked at it more deeply I found there is more going on in John's chapter about the Good Shepherd. In Dwelling in the Word, in the Homiletical Perspective, Cynthia A. Jarvis points to Jesus stating that he is the gate.

V 7: Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.

and V 9: I am the gate.

She then explores this in great detail. What do gates do? What they are for? As she puts it,

"Does Christ as the gate keep the flock from corruption by the world, or did God so love the world that the gate swings open for the lost sheep in particular?"

One thing I particularly like about being an Episcopalian is how inclusive it is;

I mean we pray for EVERYBODY! There is an online version of the book of common prayer (www.bcponline.org) and I took a look at the section on Prayers and Thanksgiving with the idea of including the list of those prayers here, I figured it would be easier if I could just do

a cut and paste thing. But it is a really long list! I mean I kept scrolling and scrolling - it seemed endless! So after that exercise I really do think we do pray for everyone, and especially the marginalized. This feels to me like we are including all of these different sorts of people with all of their different sorts of problems. And I personally believe that this is what we are called to do.

In my work as a therapist I work with sometimes very marginalized people. And I have seen the damage when they are shut out.

For example one young client, who was not-white, abandoned... one could say thrown away, at birth. He grew up knowing the story of his birth and how entirely unwanted he was. He was adopted by a local family who were touched by his story and his need. But this very white, very well-meaning family had difficulties and struggles of their own. And despite seemingly good intentions, they simply did not have the ability to support this emotionally damaged and different looking and behaving child.

This client was a young man when I met him. He had a severe substance abuse problem. He had legal problems related to his substance abuse and a bad habit of acting out at exactly the wrong times. He was also a highly intelligent, sensitive and creative young man who loved to entertain and could dream up, create and run events and businesses and just all kinds of things. He had great ideas and no fear of hard work. He wanted so much to help everyone around him.

And he had shockingly low self esteem. Once you scratched the surface it was obvious that no matter what he did, he continued to think of himself as garbage.

This client's greatest desire was to feel truly a part of something. To be seen as having value and to feel accepted and wanted. As a teenager, he found that in an evangelical church. He told me how excited he was about Jesus, and God - a heavenly father. He had no idea who or where his earthly father was. He felt included and wanted in this congregation. For a short time he found happiness, a better life; a pasture where he belonged; a place of light and love that was meant for him. He was maybe, finally inside of the gate.

But there was a problem. At about the same time he was falling passionately and completely in love with this church community and with Christianity, he was also becoming more and more certain that he was gay. And in this evangelical church you weren't allowed to be gay.

This church told him that being gay was a sin, and he believed them. They told him that they were going to help him, to fix him, and to make him an acceptable church member and christian. Otherwise, they were going to have to close the gate. Jesus would not approve of him. His heavenly father, God, would turn away from him. But it was ok, because all he had to do was stop being gay. And he would try, repeatedly and with great determination. But he was not successful. And he finally gave up. This became another example that proved to him that he was not good enough, he was at his core bad and he would never be accepted into anything good. And this is when the substance abuse and legal problems took off.

When he told me this story 10 years later, I told him about St Andrews! That there was a place of light and love that would embrace him! I told him that I believed that Jesus does love him as he is - the evidence being his wonderful talents and all of the help he has given to so many people! How could someone full of darkness do all of these good things? There must be good in him. But he couldn't believe it. His belief that he was shameful and bad, and that Jesus could not possibly love him as he was, was impenetrable, at least by me. The darkness he fought was inside of him.

Where is he now? The last I knew he was an active member of a different evangelical church where he was trying to fit in and follow the rules. He called and told me he was now heterosexual and dating women. I knew that he had never in his life spoken of any attraction to women, and I found it hard to believe. But I supported him and wished him well. Who knows, maybe he will find happiness in this way. That's all he wants, that's all he has ever wanted. To be included and feel at home. And he desperately wants Jesus and the church to be a part of his life. And thinking about him helps me to remember that feeling like I belong in a place like St Andrews is a gift. I wish this gift for my client now and forever. I wish this for everyone, especially those who don't think they deserve it.

I am no biblical scholar and I would never want to try to tell people what to think about this passage or any other. I think we are all supposed to figure it out for ourselves. It's wonderful to have a priest who can so eloquently bring the Sunday readings to life for us. One thing this Lay Preaching process has shown me is how really wonderfully talented and generous and full of heart Roger is every Sunday. And he makes it look so simple and easy and at least for me it's not!

So when I get sad, or worried, or confused I reach back to some of the old standards. Things I know I can believe in, that I know are good. For example the prayer attributed to St Francis. Which by the way is the 11th Step Prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous, so I'm told...

The Prayer attributed to St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master,

Grant that I may not so much seek

To be consoled as to console;

To be understood as to understand;

To be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.