

“Embracing an Abundant Life”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, May 7, 2017
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Readings from Scripture: 1 Peter 2:19-25 and John 10:1-11a

For it is to your credit if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, where is the credit in that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

'He committed no sin,

and no deceit was found in his mouth.'

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

1 Peter 2:19-25

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

So again Jesus said to them, '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.

'I am the good shepherd.'

John 10:1-11a

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that you have laid upon my heart, the words we have offered in song and in prayer and the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture. Transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work within us, among us and through us so that all those who hunger and thirst for righteousness might find it in our words and in our actions, all of those who seek comfort and peace might find it in the grace that we offer, and all who want to know if they belong or are welcomed will know that they are here because we as your people are hospitable and open and loving. We ask all of this in the faithful name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last week I preached a sermon all about what happens at this table when we share communion together. I took the loaf of bread and I lifted that loaf before you and I expressed my wonderings and my thoughts about 2000 years of theology around what happens when a loaf of bread becomes the body of Christ and we as Christians are allowed to come forth, take and eat, and what happens within us. I talked about the power of that moment when the body of Christ, a piece of bread is transformed and I asked the question if maybe we had gotten it just a little bit wrong, thinking that what mattered most was what happened to a loaf of bread. Instead of realizing that when Christ took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to his disciples, it wasn't him saying *this bread becomes me and you need to eat it*. Instead he was saying to each of them, *you have been loved and welcomed, you belong to my family, you are part of who I am and what I'm doing. There is a place for you and everyone at this sacred meal*.

I don't know about you, but some of the richest and deepest and most loving times of my life have happened around our dining room table. When we came to Kirkwood, there were four of us that would gather as family and now there are six. My daughter brings her fiancé, my son, his girlfriend, and the six of us sit at the table and we laugh and we tell stories and we eat good spaghetti and drink good wine and somehow magically the table and the chairs and the meal—it's as if the very walls of that room become the hands of God reaching around the six of us. And what happens in those moments is often sacred and beautiful because we are not worried about the cares of the world, we are just present with each other. We're not worried about the dumb things that we've said to each other or the hurts or the mistakes, we are just there having a good time and celebrating together. Maybe some of you have had those times. I know I've had them even alone, quiet, in the morning drinking a cup of coffee where I felt as if God kind of reached around and gave me a hug, a safe space to breathe and to be. Maybe you've had that at a Thanksgiving dinner, or maybe it's just regular dinner—some moment when you know you belong at that table and good things are happening.

I preached that sermon last week asking that question—if we need to shift the focus from bread to welcoming hospitable meal. And after the service I made my way to the back door and people started to come out—*thank you for that sermon and great sermon and nice message* and on and on and on and then someone grabbed my hand and I thought they were going to say, “Thanks for the message” and instead, they grabbed my hand, they didn't let go, they looked me in the eye and said, “Please do the same thing with Lord and Savior.” And I said, “What?” “You made us think about communion in a different way, can you talk about Jesus as Lord and Savior and help us think about what that means in a different way?”

I got in the car and thought about that and realized that's quite an assignment. Unpacking what it might mean to call Jesus Lord and Savior? I was thinking that as I came to the text on

Monday, which is my practice. I read it for the first time and just read it slowly. This assignment was playing in my head as I came to Jesus saying, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." I was also reading it as I continued on to what is my favorite part of this verse. "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd." Jesus in the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John is explaining to all of us what it means for him to be shepherd and for us to be saved. And I'm going to try again to unpack what it might mean for us to be saved.

I did not grow up in the church. I came to faith late as a teenager when I was about 18. I don't have all of the stories that other people have. I don't know much about the old testament—I wish I knew more. But one thing that I inherited from those early days of my faith experience, was a meaning of salvation that I've encountered again and again and again. The meaning of salvation that I encountered is that I am a worthless worm, drowning in a sea of misery and if not for the saving act of Jesus Christ upon that cross I would be in eternal damnation and that my job as I flail around drowning in this sea of ugliness and sin and brokenness and creepiness and whatever other kind of "ness" that's disgusting, is to try to find that one life raft called HMS Jesus, that I can grab onto and cling to and if I'm good enough, Jesus might just reach over the side and grab my belt and pull me in. And then I'll be saved. I inherited this sense of salvation—that somehow I was worthless and dirty and wrong and that I needed to do everything I could to try to be upright and good in order for Christ to notice me and pluck me out and to set me aside and to save me.

Like I said, I came to the faith as a teenager and my early 20's. Anybody else go to college and have at least one of those experiences you hope no one ever tells anybody else about? So I went to a Jesuit University so I had like 100,000 of those. My list of sins was so long that when I became a Christian, I burned through 8000 pencil erasers trying to get rid of all of them and I couldn't do it. And then someone said, "David, if you just give your life over to Jesus, he'll erase all of them." "Okay, great."

What happened to me this week as I came to this text, loving this passage about abundant life and hearing this invitation to rethink what it means to be saved, I heard Jesus, the rabbi, teaching the people of Israel about what his mission and ministry was all about. And I heard him say to them, "I am the gate, and whoever enters by me will be shalomed and they will come in and go out and find pasture." "Shalomed" is not a word that you and I would use normally, unless of course, we were at Shaare Emeth up in Des Peres and we were Jewish and it was time to hear the Torah being read. But I do not believe that Jesus, here in this passage, as he's talking almost with the echo of Psalm 23 bouncing around about *the Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want. He makes us lie down in green pastures, he leads us beside still waters, he restores our souls....* He's not talking about some sense of perdition that's so horrible that he's going to hook you and then pull you in. What Jesus is saying is that you will be shalomed.

It's taken a long time to realize that salvation is a lot more than being saved. Salvation, through Jesus Christ and the work that he does and the work of the Spirit, means that each of us comes to a sense of deep and abiding peace about who we are. Our sins are forgiven. We are saved. I don't want to discredit that sense of salvation. What I want to do is add to it. I want to add the strings and the bass, the music that's kind of behind that we don't often pay attention to unless it's not there. To realize that salvation is like a symphony, it's not a solo. It's not one voice saying, "You're a sinner. Believe in Jesus. You are saved." But instead, salvation is a lifetime of coming to peace with the fact that our sins are forgiven, that God loves us, that we are welcomed and that we belong.

John Calvin, the great theologian of our tradition, talking about the work of the Holy Spirit said that there are two things in our lives that the Spirit does. The first is that it justifies us before God. It saves us in that first sense. And the second thing it does is it sanctifies us in our life as Christians, which is the sense of shaloming, if you will. I don't know about you, but as I realize after 52 years of life, I'm starting to love the second part of salvation a whole lot more than the first. I love spending time with my family, I love spending time with you in conversation or in prayer. I love those moments when we just come together and have a conversation and you just know something else is happening.

Earlier this morning a mother pulled me aside and told me about a situation that was happening with her daughter. A tear was starting to run down her face and she said, "Oh, I'm so sorry." And I just said, "No, it's okay." Because this is what shalom looks like. This is what salvation looks like. So when we gather around this table for communion, we are practicing and remembering and embodying what it means to be saved. We, as this part of God's family, share a meal together. And in a few minutes we are going to do that again. Because an unsuspecting young man named Dylan is about to be baptized. He has no opportunity to make any kind of declaration of faith. He has no awareness that he needs to be saved. And yet we are going to proclaim on the part of God to him and his parents and his sponsors that he is welcomed, loved and cared for no matter what. No matter what. My honest prayer for all of us is that we can take that to be gospel truth for ourselves—that all of us are loved and cared for, no matter what. This might be what it means to be saved. Amen.