

“Can We Ever Have ‘One Flock’ and ‘One Shepherd’?”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 7, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

COMMUNION SUNDAY

Scripture Readings: Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

(Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

The New Testament is filled with obscure, indirect, even at times confusing teachings of Jesus. He rarely says something in a straight-forward way, but rather offers images that come nowhere near the regular religious imagery and teachings that people knew at that time, or even what we expect to be religious teachings.

The imagery of John’s gospel reading today offers a play on the image of the gate. Gates are used for a way to get through a long fence or an extended barrier. We also may use the gate for a checkpoint or for control of the movement of the traffic. Yet, without the gate there would not be ease of travel from one side to the other. Gates also can be a way of controlling people, for a gate locked and barricaded can be imposing to anyone wanting to get through. If you have the combination to get through the gate, the key to the lock, or the secret code to the passageway, then you have the answer you need. Jesus used the image of the gate as a symbol of comfort and protection – we want only those who care about us to be allowed into the fenced-in area in which we abide. In short, we want to be with those we understand and accept.

But how does that imagery work with the call to be one flock or one group of followers of God that share images, ideas, truths, understandings? Can we really have one flock in the way that Jesus spoke about it, or are we doomed to be people who always gravitate to our own ways of being and our own place, or group, in which we find comfort?

Maybe I am fascinated by the question since our national history has been a balance between local powers and concerns, and nationally-sought unity. In a fascinating book ***Great Canadian Speeches*** compiled by Dennis Gruending, a former Member of Parliament from Saskatchewan, we read about those major issues in our history that reflect that push and pull between local issues and national unity.

There are speeches by then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau implementing the War Measures Act in October, 1970 during the threat of the FLQ and the kidnapping of two individuals, and then there is the response of NDP leader Tommy Douglas, who saw such action as unnecessary and going beyond all human sense for a democracy. There is the debate in the 1979 election between Joe Clarke and Pierre Trudeau, where in a significant speech Clarke praises Trudeau for identifying the sense of alienation felt by people in Quebec, but suggests in strong words that Trudeau failed to understand that Canada is not a country of one mind and attitude, but rather a country of many communities, and to be an effective Prime Minister one must be aware of, and sensitive to, the many communities that make up this country.

We hear that attitude even today, how there is a radical difference within Ontario between people in Toronto or the GTA and those in rural areas, smaller industrial cities, and the north. We may be a province, or a country, but we are not unified by being in the same land – we must be aware of and sensitive to our unique outlooks and approaches.

In that context of our small corner of the world, I could not help but ask myself: “Why could Jesus speak about, even dream about, one flock of followers?” It helped no doubt, that he called fishermen to be his disciples. They had a similar background, training, and professional approach, one might say. But even there, as Philip Yancey outlines in his book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, these fishermen had radically different views of the world, politics, leadership, and issues of the faith.

One way to develop a uniform community is to have shared background and personal development, but even the original 12 were hardly a homogenous group.

Jesus limited his early teachings to the Jewish community in Israel, and knew the images he used, the ideas he shared, and the language he spoke was understood – or should be understood – in a basic way by all.

But then the church expanded in the early centuries, and spread across language groups and cultures, and suddenly there was no unity of thought or understanding. It became much harder to speak about, and imagine, a uniform understanding of God and much less have a uniform view of who Jesus was. Any idea of “one flock” and “one shepherd” would be lost.

The late Marcus Borg has helped me to understand what Jesus meant by the story of the flock and the gate, the understanding of shared belief in a community. Borg, in one of his last books, *Speaking Christian*, writes about the ways that terms in the Bible have changed their meaning in modern times.

One of those words is the word “believe.” In modern times, we usually use the word “believe” as related to facts, insights, observations that we “believe,” or in historic events that we have no way of confirming and proving so we “believe in” the accounts of these events. And so it is with Jesus and God. We believe “in them” as if we have no alternative but to believe their words or ultimate goals for the world.

But in the ancient world, the word “believe,” claims Borg, was synonymous with our ancient word “belove,” so people did not “believe IN” someone or something, but rather believed that someone was a good person, a reliable person, and one worth hanging out with – they were “beloved.”

And so taking that definition to this story of the sheep and the fence and the gate, a definition I find both provocative and helpful, we are left realizing that we need to have within our gated community those we can trust and feel an affinity to. It is not the whole world – there will be other communities with gates in other places, where there is a oneness of spirit and outlook.

That is not to suggest we should seek divided and autonomous groups out of touch with the rest of the world. The gate becomes a way to go beyond our comfort zone, a reminder that we are connected to the whole world through this real and important connection the gate provides us all. Yet the oneness of spirit and understanding should be with those we trust, have an affinity with, and can believe or believe.

Jesus is very clear there are decisions to make as to who remains within your fenced area, but he also is clear that we need to find ways to be welcoming of all who seek to share in the values, sense of justice, and hope that we seek in our lives.

So indeed the gate in this story does what gates are supposed to do in our world. It protects us by being a barrier to that which may threaten us, and is an invitation to those we seek to invite in and share our understanding, but also a way to invite in new ideas and perspectives from which we may learn and grow. What we need to be diligent about is not so much welcoming those with new and different perspectives, but be diligent in making sure those new and different perspectives will enhance the sense of community and support justice and fairness for all.

So be surrounded by those with whom you share a caring yet daring faith, but always remember to keep a gate ready to be opened amidst the barriers we might create, so that we can be open to those with different traditions and different understandings – we need not be protected from those with whom we may differ, but, instead, be ready to learn from them.