

Is That Bouncer Wearing Sandals?

^{NRS} Joh 10:1 "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. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers."

⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away-- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

I started my professional ministry at a fateful time in our countries' life- I started my ministry in September, 2001. When the towers came down, I was in a hotel ballroom in Colorado Springs, CO at a new church development conference, learning how much I didn't know about what I was supposed to be doing and beginning to question how much these guys *said* they knew. My Presbytery exec and I flew into Colorado- we ended up getting a ride home with some folks who happened to going to Texas and had a car. It was a strange ride home- not just because we were trying to get our heads around this unspeakable event, but because the woman who did most of the driving had an absolute, diagnosable obsession with Waffle House. Whenever we saw one, whether day or night,

whether the rest of us wanted to or not- we just had to stop. Believe me, one Waffle House is more than enough- 10 was just wrong.

But I made it back. The first sermon I gave as an official pastor I gave at Shepherd of the Hills Presbyterian Church in Austin a few weeks later. Larry, their pastor had invited me to preach on the first Sunday of October- world communion Sunday. Same day as today. If I remember correctly I terrified him by using this terrible sermon title- Bizarro Superman Jesus. I only remember the title, I don't actually remember the sermon- not a good sign. It went over OK, though- it was a good debut. But what I'll always remember that day is leaving Shepherd of the Hills and heading up Mopac back home. I turned on NPR. I learned that while we were celebrating communion with Christians around the world, while I was preaching- American bombs began to fall on Bagdad. My friends jokingly asked me what on earth had I said? I laughed, but on the inside I felt like I had been kicked in the gut.

I realized this week that during my entire ministry our country has been at war. And it doesn't look like this is going to end anytime soon, either- no matter what happens in 2008. Politically, we have a lot of different views in this congregation. I know this, and I see this as a strength. And while I do believe it is appropriate, indeed necessary, for the church to address political realities, the prophets did, Jesus certainly did, I've not addressed the war much. Sometimes I've wondered if it's because of this diversity of ours, if I've just been dodging the issue- afraid of saying something to make a few of mad, a few of us happy, and most of us just uncomfortable. To be honest I think there's some truth to this. But, the main reason I find it hard to talk about the war is because I'm

honestly not sure what to think many days. I'm honestly not sure what's the best course, the wisest course for us to take. But today, on this world communion Sunday, on this day we lift up our hope for peace, I want to do something I've never done before. I want to talk with you about the war- but not about the politics of the war, about the theology of it- for this conflict doesn't merely involve countries, does it? No, at the heart of this conflict is a meeting between two faith traditions, Christianity and Islam- faith traditions that are related, but unique.

This morning I don't presume to tell you what to think, it's not like you would anyway- like herding a bunch of dog gone cats around here. But I do want to impress upon you one thing I want you to hear- and it's that if we want to see peace for our children and for our children's children, we as Christians *have* to find a way to claim Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior AND know that this faith in Jesus Christ leads us *into* loving and respectful relationships with others, and not fear or hatred or sad attempts to make them think the same way we do.

But we have our work cut out for us. For one thing none of us really know much about our Muslim neighbor. And the one Muslim we hear about most of the time is twisted by hatred and an architect of mass murder. In his last message addressed to the American people Osama Bin Laden invited us all to embrace Islam. So far I haven't heard of any takers. And for good reason. Islamic scholars tell us by encouraging us to accept Islam, he isn't honestly offering us his faith as much as he is just crossing his t's before more violence. In the radical form of Islam Bin Laden follows it's appropriate to

offer Islam before committing violence, although it's not like this has stopped him from killing in the past.

It's hard to learn about something you're afraid of, and I think it's fair to say we fear Islam, and with guys like Bin Laden out there I think this is understandable. But while it's understandable, it isn't right- we as Christians are called to something better than rank prejudice based on fear. But prejudice is all most of us have right now, because we just don't know much about Islam.

Before the most recent Iraq war, how many of us even knew there was such a difference in the Islamic world between Sunnis and Shia? How many sitting here right could articulate the difference? Don't raise your hands. (Just for a learning moment the split came when the prophet Mohammed died in 632. The community was split over how to go forward. The people who came to be known as Sunni's followed a more democratic approach to succession- they followed the person they acknowledged to be the best leader, Abu Bakr, the father of one of the prophet's wives, Aisha. The shias on the other hand followed a royal approach and believed the prophet wanted the community to follow his son-in-law Ali. From there the two forms developed independently, relating to one another just slightly better than dogs and cats, apple and mac people, and the Roman Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.)

How many of us know Arabic and have read the Koran in the original? I certainly haven't. How many of us even know the five pillars of Islam- believing that God is one, praying five times a day, practicing charitable giving, fasting during Ramadan, and going on Hajj, or pilgrimage, just for the record. How many of us can count a Muslim as a friend, having dinner with them and their family say, more than, once or twice a year?

Any of us? The point of all this- we just barely know anything about this faith tradition. What we do know, or think we know, comes mainly from a homicidal mass-murderer bent only on destruction. It would be like learning Christianity from Hitler- whose first ambition, by the way, was to become a Roman Catholic priest. It's from Bin Laden we hear that there is no room for difference in Islam. It's from *him* we learn that all non-Muslims should be converted or else. It's from *him* we learn that Islam may begin with the open hand, but in the end it will always end with the sword- wielded by him and his friends no doubt.

And my great sadness? My great sadness is not so much for what this kind of thinking has done to Islam, to true Islam, and it's done great harm indeed. No, my great sadness is what he's done to us, what he's done to the Christian community here in America.

Since America has encountered Bin Laden and his fascism dressed up as religion, I've seen us react in basically two ways. I've seen some of us react by drawing the lines as narrowly as we can around our faith- no longer comfortable with leaving salvation up to God, but having to nail down and define who is worthy of God's love and who isn't, or who is 'us' and who is 'them'. But then on the opposite side, I've seen some of us retreat from our faith in Jesus Christ almost entirely- concerned that religion itself is what is to blame for war. And if we claim faith at all, we water it down, using more generic language and stepping back from the strong name of Jesus that seems more exclusive and likely to cause offense.

I'm sad about this because neither one of these is right. Neither one of these responses is right. Neither digging in and saying only people who believe in Jesus ONLY LIKE I DO will be saved; nor watering everything down and soft pedaling our faith in Jesus Christ is right and is going to help.

On this day we celebrate with believers around the world, this day we celebrate our hope for peace, I tell you if we are going to help make a world where our children and our children's children can live in peace it is going to come from us learning how to boldly claim Jesus Christ as our savior, as our center, AND from us knowing that this faith leads us towards open, loving, and respectful relationships with people in other religious traditions not away from them.

How do we do this? Well, for me our text this morning is the key. It's one of my absolute favorites. In context Jesus has just healed a man blind from birth, and the religious authorities, the pastors of the day- all they want to do is argue with Jesus about whether the man sinned or his parents did. So it's in the context of Jesus duking it out with Presbytery that he tells them this:

He says, "Listen, the sheep, the people, they just want to be safe- they want to eat grass and drink cool water. And they will only follow the shepherd who cares for them, and the gate keeper, the bouncer- will only let shepherds in. No wolves allowed."

"And up until now", Jesus tells the pastors, "you haven't been caring for the sheep, you've been fleecing the sheep, caring more about sin than forgiveness of sin. But now that I'm here, he says, listen up: I'm the door, I'm the gatekeeper, and I'm the shepherd. I care for the sheep, I lead them to good things, and I protect them."

Jesus is the door. He's the doorkeeper, and he's the shepherd, all rolled into one enormous mixed metaphor. I love it! But, I know to some of you, this may not sound like great news. This sounds like the Christian version of Osama Bin Laden, only this version instead of Islam being what saves everybody, it's Christianity, or at least the "right" version of it. If Jesus is the door, then it sounds like there's no room for anyone who believes differently or follows another path.

But take another look. And notice very carefully that Jesus doesn't say that it's Christianity that's the door, he doesn't say it's any particular church, or faith statement, or religious belief that's the door. No. What is the door? HE'S the door. Jesus is the door.

And as a door have you noticed the kinds of people he's been letting in? It's terrible. Prostitutes. Check. The poor. Check. The sinful. Check. But the pastors, the guys you would think have all the keys... Yeah, not so much. One of my favorite lines in all of scripture is Jesus calling the Pharisees, the pastors, white washed tombs. We're white washed tombs he says- we look nice on the outside, but we're all dead on the inside.

Friends when Jesus is the gate keeper, the great bouncer in front of the great sheep bar in the sky, you and I can trust this: we can trust that by our faith in him we may enter into good pasture. AND, we can trust that since HE is the gate keeper, we should expect to encounter some strange people there, too, people we do not expect to see. See, when Jesus is the one at the door- you and I are free from having to play the terrible duck, duck, goose game of figuring out who is worthy and who isn't. And it's a good thing, too, because none of us have a clue who Jesus deems as worthy and who he doesn't.

None of us have a clue as to who he considers part of his flock. And, in case you don't believe me, he makes this abundantly clear a few verses later- "Don't think this is all about you, either- I have sheep not of this flock that I have to gather in, too."

The good news of the Gospel, the most amazing news in the world is that Jesus is shepherd, door, and door keeper all rolled into one. And we can claim Jesus Christ as our savior with great strength and vigor *without* implying that we Presbyterians, or we Christians, are all right and everybody else is all wrong. No, we can claim Jesus, and trust that since he's the one letting folks in and out, and we KNOW he has sheep not of this fold- we not only can but we *must* treat others, whatever their faith tradition, with the dignity and the respect accorded to his sheep who may well be grazing in another pasture- indeed, treating them as if entertaining angels unawares. Who knows- you just might see them on the other side.

Back in Austin I became friends with the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church downtown. Greg was the president of Austin Area Interfaith Ministries- a group that welcomed folks from different faith traditions all over Austin to work together and learn more about one another. At one point I was asked to pray at one of the gatherings. And I talked to Greg about this- I told him I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't want to offend anyone, and I didn't know what kind of prayers were welcome. And he was so helpful to me. He told me real diversity doesn't mean watering down what you believe until everyone's left with mush. Real diversity is everyone praying in the language they know and then respecting honest difference. Greg said, "When I pray, I pray in the name of

Jesus Christ, because he's my Lord. And I respect those who pray in other names, because Jesus taught me that whoever cares for the least of these care for him."

From Greg I expected this, but another man surprised me this week. This week I learned that President Bush met with the Islamic Center in Washington D.C. on September 17th, 2001. Speaking of 9/11 he said this about Islam: "These acts of violence against innocents violate the fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith. And it's important for my fellow Americans to understand that. The English translation is not as eloquent as the original Arabic, but let me quote from the Koran, itself: In the long run, evil in the extreme will be the end of those who do evil. For that they rejected the signs of Allah and held them up to ridicule. The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. That's not what Islam is all about. Islam is peace."

President Bush is willing to read the Koran and says Islam is peace. This world communion Sunday let us break bread with one another, let us share the cup, and let us also dream this dream of peace, the peace of Islam, the peace of Christ. And may we remember that we dream in the shadow of Christ, shepherd, doorkeeper, and door-knower knowing we can trust he will lead us to green fields, still waters, and that there we will meet sheep from a thousand other pastures as well. **Amen.**