

“Living Abundantly”

John 10:1-10

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From the Pulpit

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John 10:1-10

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Let us pray: O Holy One, come to us now. Touch us, move us, and speak to us through Your Word and through the words that You place on each of our hearts. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer this day please You and honor You and glorify Your holy name. Amen.

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So, here we are! It is now the Fourth Sunday of Easter, and the messages of our lectionary readings these past few weeks have been clear – and direct – and challenging – and even confrontational – about what it means NOT *just* to celebrate the Resurrection on Easter Sunday – but what it means to *live* as a Resurrection people **every day** throughout the year.

Now, on that Second Sunday of Easter, a couple of weeks ago, in our reading from John, as you may recall, “doubting Thomas” represents all of us in our own moments of uncertainty and doubt. And yet, that story also teaches us that the Risen One is *always* actively present in our lives through the gift of our faith and our belief.

And then, last Sunday, on the Third Sunday of Easter, in that familiar “Road to Emmaus” story from Luke, we are, *again*, challenged to open our hearts and open our spirits and open our minds and open our eyes – that we might recognize – and experience – the presence and nearness of Jesus who does, *indeed*, accompanies *each of us* along the road that we travel as we navigate our life’s journey.

And so, now, today, on this Fourth Sunday of Easter, in chapter 10, the Gospel writer of John, who *clearly* had been inspired by the numerous references to ***God as Shepherd*** throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, presents to us, in this text, what is often referred to as the “Good Shepherd” discourse.

And so, here, in just these 10 verses of our reading today, we are given the image of Jesus as both *the Shepherd* – and, later on in this passage – Jesus ***also*** identifies himself as the GATE.

Jesus is the GATE.

And *we* are the sheep.

This story – on the surface – seems to be teaching us that we ***cannot*** enter the pasture without first passing through the gate.

Jesus. ***as***. the. gate.

Jesus. ***is***. the. gate.

How does that image work for you?

Jesus as the gate.

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In my personal life, there ***have been*** times when I have felt a bit lost with regard to the direction of my life’s journey or uncertain about my future plans. And so, seeing Jesus as ***the gate*** has encouraged me, at times, to become more prayerful and discerning and intentional and trusting of God’s unfolding path before me.

Jesus as the gate has grounded me during those times and helped me find my way forward.

However, I also am aware that *some* Christians use these very same words in ways that exclude others!

For instance, when I was in college (many moons ago), I became involved with a campus ministry for a time, and I can remember that one of the campus ministers referenced this very passage by insisting that his Jewish roommate and his Muslim neighbor would never know “the Truth” unless they would finally come to understand that Jesus is the *one and only gate* to eternal life.

It wasn't long after that – that I left *that* campus ministry – and made the effort to find a

United Church of Christ congregation in downtown Pittsburgh and made that my church home during my college years!

Jesus is the gate to welcoming and inclusive communities!

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The gate is wide open, here, at First Congregational United Church of Christ, and on this very special day, we are celebrating with:

Cindy, Al, Gary, Claudia, Susie, Austin, Michael (and their daughter, Cory), Doug, Haley, Noah (and their baby Astrid) and Terri.

And, once again, we are all choosing to covenant with them and with one another – in love *and* faith in God – **and** through the gift of this blessed community.

On this day, when we have received **eleven** new members – and, in a few moments, we'll honor one of the sages among us, the one and only Rick Sayre – that last verse of our Gospel reading today seems to be amplified this day.

Can't you just hear Jesus exclaiming those words of that last verse?

“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly!”

An abundant life. An abundant life. Much has been written in Scripture about what it means to live abundantly.

Throughout the Bible, God demonstrates *unending* generosity and shares the abundance of Her creation with humankind.

And, in the Gospel miracle stories and parables, Jesus modeled for his followers:

a new way of living together and caring for one another and sharing **with** each another, without any fear of scarcity.

Believing in a theology of abundance **is** an intentional way of living together in community with one another. And it is a direct contradiction and rejection of the individualism and consumerism that dominate our society today.

Believing in a theology of abundance is, indeed, a choice and a spiritual practice and a way of life!

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As you reflect on the ministries of First Church in recent times, where have you witnessed the theology of abundance being lived out?

Well, just this past week, between 1600 and 1700 individuals of various congregations and faith traditions across our city – showed up, stood up, and spoke up for justice – at the Nehemiah Action/BREAD Assembly – and 75 of those activists were from First Church!

This is an example of the theology of abundance!

And here, at church, earlier this month, we hosted what I believe was our first-ever Easter egg hunt on Easter Sunday, thanks to the leadership of Emily Schmitt, Joanna McWilliams, and Wendy Kennedy. And we weren't really sure just how many young ones to expect. We were hoping for at least 10 or 15 and, as it turned out, over 40 children participated in that Easter event!

This speaks to the theology of abundance!

And in our music ministry program during the recent interim time – before Josh arrived last month – it was absolutely amazing to witness just how many folks stepped forward to share their gifts of leadership and time – including Jim and Barry and Jennifer and David and Anne and Sandy and Marti and Joel – and so many others!

This is an example of the theology of abundance!

We don't have to look far for examples of how we are *living abundantly*, here, at First Church – and in our wider community – and perhaps in our personal lives as well.

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In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells us that he came that we may have life – and have it **abundantly!**

I'd like to close with a few words from Wendell Berry who is a novelist, poet, farmer, and environmental activist.

These are the closing words from his poem, "The Wild Geese."

What we need is here.

And we pray, not for new earth or heaven,
but to be quiet in heart,
and in eye, clear.

What we need is already here.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

