

-On April 28th, one week ago Friday, a student of color at St. Olaf College (my alma mater) went out to their car and found a note tucked in the driver's side door. The note read: "I am so glad that you are leaving soon. One less n----- that this school has to deal with. You have spoken up too much. You will change nothing. Shut up or I will shut you up." This was one of several notes that have been written to students of color on campus at St. Olaf this past year: another one being found tucked creepily tucked into another student's backpack while they were eating lunch in the cafeteria. I don't know if you have heard the news coming from this little Lutheran school in Minnesota, but it's been an intense week. A sit-in protest was staged that took over the Buntrock Commons (the student center) most of last weekend. So much of the student body was involved with this sit-in that classes were canceled this last Monday. Tweets and Facebook posts of students chanting over and over again: "This ends now, this ends now." have continued to come out daily.

-These events at my former college have caused me great anger, sadness, and emotion. They have caused me this week to look at this text in John a little differently. I have to be upfront, the moment I first read this gospel text for my sermon prep, it didn't sit well with me. "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep." Ugh...that's not very comforting to think of Jesus as a gate. Especially in light of racism, it brings up some very problematic and damaging interpretations that the church has used in the past. One of the most common damaging interpretations being: Jesus as the gate is also the gatekeeper. One must be "the right kind of person" in order to be let in. If you are not, you may not be let into the fold." This kind of reading plays into the challenge, I think, of seeing Jesus as a gate period. I built a garden gate in my backyard not because I want to invite the deer and bunnies in....but keep them out! So where is, especially in light of the horrible racism that still plagues our country, the good news in this parable?

-I think where to start is to maybe explore the different purposes of a gate. Notice Jesus never says that the "purpose of the gate is to keep out other sheep." In fact, he says shortly after our section today in verse 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." These are words of comfort here, not of warning. So what if we saw the purpose of the gate not to define "who is in and who is out", but to guard against all that threatens the well-being of the sheep: thieves, bandits, and wolves.

-Who are the thieves and bandits that Jesus is talking about here? Maybe they are the Pharisees and the Sadducees who are using Jewish law and teachings for their own gain and not of the people they lead. Maybe it's the people of the synagogues in the time of John's community, the immediate audience of this gospel, who have been essentially kicked out and persecuted; labeled as "other" because of being followers of Jesus. I think this is an interesting question to explore more broadly, and one that I define a little more generally for today. The thief is one that comes only to "steal and kill

and destroy". Seeing it this way, I think, expands this text beyond Jesus and John's time into today. Who are the thieves and bandits for us today? Who are the thieves and bandits for you personally? Maybe the thief for you is a disease that weakens and destroys your body. Maybe the thief is your boss at work that because of your gender, will not give you a pay raise like everyone else. Maybe the thief is damaging images of God that you learned as a child and that come back to make you question yourself.

-When I read this text, I am drawn to the incredible line that Jesus says at the end: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and *have it abundantly*. *Perissos*: "all-around". So they may have life "all around".

-This text is about feeling protected and secure. When you have the gate, you don't have to worry about survival. If you can feel protected and cared for in basic ways, you can have the freedom to find life abundantly or "all around". This is why Jesus came: to free us from having to worry about our safety so that we can have life.

-But, it can't end there. That would be naive, because the thief does come sometimes doesn't it? Many of us in this room have suffered from the thief and bandit. Some of us have had or are still struggling with a crippling illness and disease. Some of us have experienced major trauma and sexual abuse. Some of us have lost a job and faced an uncertain future. Some of us struggle with depression and isolation. So where is Christ in all of this?

-Let's face it, some of us have not felt protected our entire lives. I don't think those students who received these targeted notes felt or even still feel protected. I don't have a simple answer on the "why doesn't God stop bad things happening to good people" question. (sorry!) But what I can say is this: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." (Acts 2:46-47) This early church couldn't stop the persecution of their members by the Roman empire entirely, but they could stand together in their witness. Their witness that the living Christ does put the bandit and thief at bay through gathering, love, and hope. This is what the early Greek word for "church" means: *eklesia* (gathering or standing of the people). The students formed an "eklesia" standing together with their fellow students of color in Buntrock Commons at St Olaf. We form this morning an "eklesia" and help each other stand when the bandit threatens to destroy.

-This what our sacraments are also about: standing together and welcoming the living Christ. In conclusion, this is what I wind up having questions on: how are our practices and traditions as a church done as safely as possible so that those who partake can live life "all around"? What work do we need to do to make our rituals more acts of safety so that *all of us (not some of us) may have life abundantly*. This is the calling I believe of Jesus as the gate. May the church have the courage to be the "eklesia" and stand with/protect those who desperately need abundant life. Amen.