

The Open Gate
Psalm 23
John 10:1-10
May 15, 2011
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For two weeks I watched the newspaper and Facebook for news of a Sonoma State student who was missing, James Abriel. Last Saturday his body was found in Annadel State Park in Santa Rosa with a gun. James was 19, from Orinda, a 4.0 student at SSU, and a bass guitar and string bass player. His death is a tragedy. We hold his friends and family in our prayers.

Many of us have been touched by suicide at some time in our lives. In junior high I had a friend whose mother killed herself by slitting her wrist. I remember my conversation with my father about her death. I asked why someone would do that, and he said, "She was a very sick person, and she had been sick for a long time."

After college, a high school friend of mine committed suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. Her parents didn't want to call it suicide, but her friends knew. We had each received a call that day, a little out of the blue. We didn't know it at the time, but she was saying good-bye. I knew that she suffered from bipolar disease. She would be in touch when she was manic and want to get together. This last time when she called, though, she must have been depressed, but she covered it well.

As an adult, I was away with my family one Christmas vacation, and when we came back into town, we learned that a woman at our church had died by breathing exhaust fumes in her garage. I remember feeling at such a loss, having missed seeing her recently and then, on top of that, being away for the memorial service.

Later, a group of us gathered with the minister to talk about this woman's death. I remember saying, it helps so much to know that we belong to a community that believes in life, that we belong to a community that believes in hope. Because otherwise, this would be too much to bear.

A person who commits suicide must feel it's too much to bear.

95% of the people who die by suicide have a mental illness. Depression, bipolar disease, and schizophrenia are often the cause of death by suicide. These are treatable disorders, but often difficult to treat. They require psychiatric evaluation, medication, and therapy. Because they are diseases of the mind, often the individual does not have the necessary insight into his or her own ailment to get help. Besides mental illness, other causes of suicide are often a feeling that the person doesn't belong or that he is a burden. It takes a kind of determination to commit suicide, but there is nothing heroic or romantic about it. Suicide is simply tragic.

Some churches consider suicide to be a mortal sin. Not ours. The United Methodist Church believes that "a Christian perspective on suicide begins with an affirmation of faith that nothing, including suicide, separates us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). Therefore, we deplore [the condemning of people] who complete suicide, and we consider unjust the stigma that so often falls on surviving family...We urge pastors and faith communities to provide pastoral care to those at risk [of suicide], ...and to those families who have lost loved ones to suicide, seeking always to remove the oppressive stigma around suicide (<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?mid=1735>).

Today is the Sunday in the Church we call the Good Shepherd Sunday. The image of God as the Good Shepherd is one of the most comforting mental pictures we have. Psalm 23 is everyone's favorite, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." If we imagine ourselves as sheep, hungry, lost, gone astray, sick, or dying, we look to the shepherd to care for us. He cannot cure every ailment nor heal every injury, but he will try, and he will not leave us abandoned. I think this concept of God is helpful to family members and friends of those who die by suicide: God the shepherd, faithful, is by our side through each day and each long night of grief.

Today's scripture lesson from John gives us two metaphors, first the shepherd and then the gate. If we take the Old Testament understanding of God as a shepherd (as in the Psalms), then at the beginning of this passage, it is God who leads the sheep through the gate. (Or God who leads the people through life.) Then Jesus says in the text, "I am the gate for the sheep....Whoever enters by me will be saved...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Does that mean those who do not enter the gate will not be saved? The traditional Christian inference is that *only* by this gate will we be saved.

There's a confusing verse that then comes next in verse 11: Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Now Jesus is no longer the gate; now he is also the shepherd. (My English teachers always told me not to mix metaphors!) So which is Jesus, the shepherd or the gate?)

I think what we have here is John's theology coming through—quite different from the other three Gospel writers. John wants us to know that only through Jesus can we find salvation. Why does he say this? Because he believes in atonement from sin allowed by Jesus' death on the cross. The writer, you see, is writing this story about Jesus who is talking to the temple leaders, but John is writing it well after Jesus died, and John is creating the words Jesus might have said, out of his own faith in the power of Jesus' atoning death on the cross. John is talking about the need to know Jesus, by entering through the gate, in order to know God, the shepherd. The need to know one, in order to know the other, is so strong, that John calls Jesus the gate *and* the good shepherd, who is God. You cannot know God without knowing Jesus, is the point he's making. This is part of our Christian tradition. Many progressive Christians in interfaith dialogue with Jewish and Muslim and Buddhist neighbors have a problem with this interpretation. The implication is that the only way to God is through Jesus Christ.

This focus on Jesus as an exclusive gate to God is not the only theological interpretation of this text in our Christian tradition. Different books of the Bible, and different denominations of Christian faith have different theological understandings. In this passage from John's Gospel, we can have different understandings of this "gate." The idea of salvation can be narrow or wide.

When our family was in Scotland two years ago, we had two interesting looks at Christian belief. These two experiences illustrate two perspectives on salvation.

In Edinburgh, I attended a prayer meeting at a Free Presbyterian Church. The church was on the same block as our guesthouse, and so on a Thursday night I filed in with about 40 others. I looked around, and every other woman or girl there wore a little woolen cap. The minister read a psalm as we read along from the Bible silently, and then we sang the psalm—no music, the people knew the tune, and then we stood and someone offered a prayer—a long prayer about the "sins of the flesh" and the "evils of humanity." Then we sat and began again with another psalm, then singing the psalm, and then standing for more prayer. Then there was a sermon, and by this time I was wondering how long would this go on, and how long would my family have to wait for me before going to dinner. I started to collect my umbrella and purse, trying to make a quick get-away, and the woman next to me who was furiously taking notes on the sermon, wrote in her notebook and passed a note to me, "If you are tight for time, please let me give you a lift." I whispered, "No thank you," and during the next psalm I ducked out.

I felt like I had gone back in time and that I had entered a 17th century meeting house in Plymouth or Salem of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This was a strict Calvinist faith—heavily focused on being the chosen people, resisting sin and living in a tight-knit community of believers in Christ (probably all with little wool caps). They referred in their prayers to passages like: "Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned" (John 15:6). They might have used the text about Jesus as the gate. Each soul *must* enter through the gate in order to escape sin and death. After I slipped out early and without a hat, I imagine they prayed for *my* soul.

This is one branch of Christian belief—one that follows the idea of original sin and the need for atonement in Jesus Christ in order to escape hell. This Calvinist doctrine is preached as the narrow gate without mention of God's grace. It's a theology of sin, and even on the website of the Free Presbyterian Church it says: "We preach Christ crucified." Well, and we do too, on Good Friday, or on Passion Sunday, but not on any other Sunday of the year. We preach Christ risen!

While in Scotland, I had another experience. My daughter, Leslie, and I spent a week on the Island of Iona, and it was a completely different religious environment. The Iona Community is an ecumenical center that worships in an ancient abbey church surrounded by green fields with sheep grazing everywhere, and ocean views all around. It is a holy place where people come to experience renewal and engage in dialogue about the needs of

the world. The songs and liturgy lift up the goodness of God's creation and our responsibility to care for it.

Irish monks brought Christianity to Iona off the west coast of Scotland in the year 563. These monks and their Scottish converts expressed their Celtic love of nature, by fashioning large standing stone crosses, like the one on your bulletin cover, with the circle for the sun on the cross. They carved patterns of waves and plant life onto the crosses, and they illustrated the Gospels in the beautiful Book of Kells, with animals, and plants illuminating the Latin text of the Bible. These Celtic Christians incorporated their pre-Christian Celtic spirituality with its appreciation for the goodness of the natural world into Christian belief. (It is a lot like the Native American spirituality we talked about last week—love of nature and one God the creator of all...) Celtic spirituality is not about a judgmental gatekeeper or narrow gate; no, it's about a generous shepherd. The focus is not on preaching Christ crucified. The focus is on preaching Christ risen and living again with the flowers and the green grass, the sun and the breeze, and the hope of the world!

The very-first-known painting of Jesus was a picture of the Good Shepherd on the ceiling of a catacomb in Rome. At the time, the Romans were feeding Christians to the lions in the Coliseum. But this early, underground Christian artist wanted to portray an alternative image, one of protection and love. Not the image of violence and death, but the image of protection and love.

Protection and love are what families and loved ones who survive suicide need. Protection and love are what people at risk of suicide need. They don't need judgment. They don't need abandonment. They need protection from the stigma of suicide and mental illness, and they need the love of community.

Our son Eric took his own life on September 10, 2001, one day before September 11th. We believe he had paranoid schizophrenia. He was 26. The people of our church were very helpful—they surrounded us with love and care. I do remember three comments, though, that were not helpful. One person said, "I'm so angry with Eric for ending his life." I guess this person couldn't imagine the despair he must have felt. Another person said she thought maybe God had a reason for this, and that perhaps God was trying to teach us something. I could only cry and walk away. A third person said, "Sometimes things like this cause a marriage to fall apart." O, great! (That didn't happen.) Today is Eric's birthday; he would be 36.

The God I believe in is with me even in my darkest valley. The God I believe in walks with me through the valley of death and allows me not to be afraid. The God I believe in is a shepherd who loves me and wants only goodness for me. The gate we go through together, God and I, is wide open, surrounded with green grass and sunshine and warm breeze. The fog lifts and change is possible with new vistas, and the future is hopeful because I am surrounded by loving people who embody the love Jesus came to teach us about, God's love, the love of the Good Shepherd. I know this love; it has carried me through despair into a call to ministry that has brought me here to St. John's.

We are not alone. God leads us even when things happen that we do not understand, like suicide. I admire those who are open about mental illness and suicide. The *Press Democrat* recently interviewed our County Supervisor, Shirlee Zane, about her husband's suicide, Peter Kingston, on January 18. Shirlee Zane wants to change the popular view of mental illness and suicide from being subjects that are taboo.

We can help by talking openly about mental health and about death and dying. We can check on each other, call someone up we might be worried about. We can give people who are suffering from grief a place to talk and cry. We can be the church, the community of people called to be the love of God. The gate is wide open here. The gate leads to God through Jesus Christ, yes, but the gate is wide open to all. We believe in universal grace, salvation for all people. The gate leads to the promise of green pastures and new life, and that's a good thing.