

## MIXED METAPHORS

Fourth Sunday of Easter, a; [John 10:1-11](#)

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*Prayer: Truth-telling, wind-blowing, life-giving Spirit, we present ourselves now for our instruction and guidance; breathe your truth among us. Breathe your story of death and life that our story may be submitted to your will for life. We pray in the name of Jesus risen to new life—and him crucified. Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

If there is one thing I learned from Mrs. Newell, my 11<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher, it is that you don't mix metaphors. If, as Carl Sandburg tells us, the fog comes in on little cat feet, then it can not at the same time weigh upon us like a heavy blanket. It is either a little cat or a blanket — not both.<sup>2</sup>

I learned this after an outburst of creative penmanship in which we were asked to write a poem about something we were passionate about. I compared a young woman who had captured my fancy to a budding magnolia in one line, and a broom in the next. (“She swept me off my feet.”) Mrs. Newell said “Never, never mix your metaphors. If life is a wondrous flower garden, do not say in the same sentence that it is a wisp of smoke or an endless treadmill. Likewise, a girl can not be both a blossoming magnolia and a broom. (Of course, she didn't know Betty McInally!) If you mix metaphors, Mrs. Newell explained, you will mix up those who are listening, and nobody will understand you.

Jesus must have missed English class, or rather, Aramaic class, the day the teacher talked about metaphors. Or if he was there, his mind must have wandered, for he didn't learn the lesson very well. Jesus walks through the Gospel of John mixing metaphors at every turn. I'll concede that it is possible one day for Jesus to call himself the Bread of Life, and the next day say “I am the light of the world (as long as he doesn't expect the bread to be a lamp to our path or the light to be eaten.)

But in this lesson, Jesus is first of all the shepherd who enters by the gate; then suddenly Jesus becomes the gate. Now, Mrs. Newell might say “Either he is the shepherd entering by the gate or he is the gate, but not both. Go back and re-write that paragraph.

But I wonder ... is it possible that Jesus could be both the shepherd and the gate?

“Yes, of course, it's possible. It's here in the Bible.” That's one answer. Bible trumps good English any day. But it doesn't help us understand what he meant. Or we might add, “Jesus didn't have to listen to the teacher. He *was* the teacher. He taught teachers when he was twelve years old! He didn't take heed to rules about teaching on the Sabbath, so why should he heed rules about proper grammar? There. We can close the book, confident that Jesus came not that we might have good grammar, but that we might have life...and have it abundantly.

Which brings us back to the book. For even though we find the metaphors confusing, we long for the abundant life that is promised there. We've looked everywhere and tried everything for that kind of life, but they have all come up empty, and so we are drawn back again and again to this one who dares to call himself both the shepherd and the gate at the same time.

Maybe we should take the words separately and work on each of them one at a time. OK, let's start with the shepherd. We know about shepherds, not from our own experience, but primarily from all those images in the bible. But as we look at those, it becomes clear that this is NOT the shepherd we have met in other gospels ... you know, the one out on the hillside searching for one lost sheep while 99 are safe in the fold. This shepherd has his own sheep and they know him. There's no indication that this shepherd is combing the bushes looking for more. (Remember the other rule from the teacher: do not read MORE into a passage than is actually there.)

In John's gospel, it is true that not all the world is the sheepfold. This was the last of the gospels written, and followers of Jesus had started to experience more and more of the hard times, persecutions, that Jesus had talked about. And so there is a distinction between those of the world and those who follow the shepherd. Everyone is not one big happy family inside the same fold: some are thieves and robbers, some are strangers, some are children of light while others are children of darkness. This shepherd leads out those who belong to him ... not everybody.

Now, we say, this is the shepherd we have been waiting for! A shepherd who has some standards! A shepherd who agrees that many are called but few are chosen. (Jesus doesn't say it here, but we know he would agree.) This shepherd is someone we can trust. So let us take this shepherd and stand by the gate.

Which is just what happened in a church I know in New York City, of all places. It could have been another city, even Memphis, but this was in New York. A man stood every Sunday morning right outside the door of his church. He had been a member of that church for years, long before the neighborhood began to change. Though many had moved away, he and his wife had decided to stay. Now, every Sunday, he stood outside the door, a self-appointed greeter. Whenever people of a different race came up the sidewalk, he told them as politely as any greeter would that they must be looking for the church right down the street. He fully believed they must be looking for that address and knew they would be more comfortable there. It was just like he told the church council, "People like to worship with their own kind."

What a shame, we say, and as we said last week, we've come a long way. Thank goodness those days are over. We would never stand by the door like that. We are perhaps more subtle. We have developed other ways for keeping the sheepfold pure. Like, not talking to people who come to worship. Or making judgments against certain kinds of behavior; by defining a "Christian lifestyle" and excluding those who don't fit our definition. After all, we must follow the shepherd and there are times when you simply have to close the gate.

But just when we are about to close the gate on those we thought couldn't possibly be following our shepherd, we found God's foot stuck in the gate. It happened at Bethlehem. God's intrusion into the world we were creating in our own image means that somehow we must see the shepherd and the gate together. Just when we had become accustomed to hearing the shepherd

call our names and those of our own flock, the shepherd BECOMES the gate — and all sorts of sheep get in that we would never have invited.

And just in case we mist the point while trying to keep our grammar correct, Jesus says it very plainly in the next verses:

*I have other sheep, he says, that are not of this fold: I must bring them also, And they will heed my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.*

Isn't that just like Jesus? Just when we thought the flock had been chosen, Jesus is off calling more. Jesus has a way of mixing up the words that changes the rules in mid-sentence. We are caught off guard while we were following by looking at our own feet.

Little children are called wise. The first become last. The mighty are brought low. Outcasts are called blessed. It's hard, even scary, this rule changing. We want things to be consistent, unchanging. We want to live by the rules and long for others to do the same. And when we are most afraid, we make up rules that Jesus never thought of, like who can be ordained and who can't.

So in our fear, we set up a gate which protects the sheepfold and those inside. We are willing to follow the shepherd, but WE want to be the gate. "People like to worship with their own kind." "You know that he lives with another man." "I think they're a bit more evangelical." "She's into all that feminist stuff." "We don't need to follow up on them. They live in Binghamton."

If we are going to follow the shepherd, then we must remember that this is the shepherd who is also the gate. There is no way to follow him if we insist on determining who gets into the fold. For you never know who this shepherd might be calling out to; and who might hear his voice.

I remember hearing about a church drama troupe that presented, as a special event on the weekend before Christmas a "dessert and drama" production of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol." The church fellowship hall was transformed into a theater, folding chair clustered around tables, all facing a makeshift stage fitted with painted backdrops of the tenements and sooty chimneys of 19<sup>th</sup> century London.

When the audience gathered and were handed their programs, some were amused to note that the part of the tightfisted Ebenezer Scrooge was being played by the chairman of the church board, a gentle man of un-Scrooge-like generosity. They were impressed, though, by the skill and energy he brought to his part. He growled his way through the opening scenes, ringing out every "Bah! Humbug!" with miserly ill will.

The final scene called for a transformed and jubilant Scrooge to chase the shadows of the remorseful night and to greet the light of Christmas day by flinging open his bedroom window and bellowing festively to the startled city street below, "M-e-r-r-y Christmas, everyone! M-e-r-r-y Christmas!" Then Scrooge, wishing to bestow Christmas gifts upon the needy of London and looking for someone to help dispense his cheer, was to act as if he had spied a street urchin passing by. "Hey you, boy, you there!" the mirthful Scrooge was to shout, pointing vigorously at this imaginary figure. "Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you to do!"

But something beautiful and unexpected happened. When the radiant and transformed Scrooge beckoned from the window, “Come up here, boy, I’ve got something wonderful for you to do,” a six year old boy in the audience, seated with his family who were members of the congregation, spontaneously rose from his chair in response to this jubilant and generous call and walked on stage, ready to do “something wonderful.”

The actor playing Scrooge blinked in disbelief. There was now an unscripted child from the audience standing on center stage. What do to? The audience held its breath. Then the person of faith beneath the veneer of Scrooge took charge. Bounding down from his window perch, he strode across the stage and cheerily embraced the waiting boy. “Yes, indeed,” he exclaimed, his voice full of blessing. “You are the one, the *very* one I had in mind.” Then he gently led the boy back to his seat in the audience, returned to the stage and resumed the play. When the curtain calls were held, it was, of course, this boy, the one who had felt himself personally summoned from his seat, who received, along with old Ebenezer himself, the audience’s loudest and warmest applause.<sup>3</sup>

The Sheep hear and know the merciful voice of the Good Shepherd. And when they get up out of their seats in the darkened auditorium and bound upon the stage ready to follow, the Good Shepherd himself embraces them, “Yes, you are the one, the *very* one I had in mind.”

But let us not forget that this Shepherd is also the gate. And someone like that is also apt to invite almost anybody upon stage, into the kingdom of God. It’s enough to scare us to death — or awaken us to life ... and life abundant, at that. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People*, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of mixed metaphors and much of the thought from this sermon came from my friend Barbara Lundblad, who is the Professor of Homiletics at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Long, *Whispering the Lyrics*, pp. 106-7.

## **John 10:1-11**

**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.

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