

May 15, 2011

John 10:1-10

Floodgate of Grace

Last week several of you asked me about the flooding along the Mississippi River and if it was going to affect our Mississippi mission trip.

I didn't think so, but I wanted to make sure, so this week I paid a lot of attention to the news. I'm sure many of you did the same thing.

Vancleave, where we will be staying, is inland and east far enough to be safe. The areas along the coast may indeed experience some rise in water levels, but the new homes there have been built up on stilts, so I believe they will be safe. Other, older homes in lower areas along the coast may have some flood damage, and I will continue to watch as the flood reaches the Gulf Coast.

As I watched the news the enormity of this flood astounded me!

I saw footage of the water rising in every place along the river. I saw people packing up all their belongings and evacuating. I saw satellite pictures of the river spreading itself over farms and towns, roads and homes.

A near-record-level flood, displacing thousands of people. The Army Corps of Engineers had to make some tough decisions. By opening certain floodgates along the big river, they will lower the level of the flooding farther downstream, when it gets to New Orleans.

They can save some homes there, in that big city that went through such terrible flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina---a city that has already been through so much!

It was a tough decision, though, because every floodgate they opened means that the homes, the schools, the businesses in some other town been flooded. The decision to sacrifice small towns to save parts of New Orleans was not easy. I am glad it wasn't my call to make!

If I lived in one of those little towns, I am positive that I would have wanted the floodgates to stay CLOSED!! But if I lived in New Orleans, I am sure that I would have been saying, quite loudly, "OPEN THE FLOODGATES!"

The US Army Corps of Engineers has the power and the responsibility to open or close those floodgates. They are the gatekeepers, with the power to decide whose homes are saved and whose are sacrificed for the greater good.

In our reading from the Gospel according to John this morning, Jesus talks about the gatekeeper opening the gate for the sheep.

Now, these days most of us know very little about sheep, but we understand about gates. Gates can be decorative. They can be functional. They can serve as a mostly visual barrier or divider, or they can actually serve to keep people and animals in or out.

The kind of gate that Jesus is talking about in this passage is a gate to the place where the sheep stay at night to be safe from wild animals and also from thieves. The gatekeeper keeps the sheep safe from harm. He also lets the shepherd in to take care of the sheep. This is where this passage starts getting complicated.

Because Jesus is the gatekeeper, protecting the sheep. He is also the shepherd, taking care of and leading the sheep to green pastures.

And then he says he is also the gate! The way to go in and out!

People in Jesus' day knew more about sheep and gates than we do today, but all we have to know are the important things---the parts of this allegory that made it good news to people in the first century are the same parts that make it good news for us today---

That Jesus cares for us, protects us, knows us all by name. That there is a personal relationship between us and Christ.

And if we spend enough time listening to Christ's voice, then we will recognize it when he calls. We will also know if the voice we hear is NOT Christ's voice, and we will also be smart enough not to pay attention to the voice of anyone else.

Because listening to other voices can damage our relationship with Christ. Those other voices belong to the liars and the thieves who want us to follow them to an entirely different gate and force us into a place that is NOT safe, that is not protected.

The sheepfold is the place where you are safe in the arms of Christ, the place that you go to rest and regenerate. It is not a literal place. It is a spiritual place, a place of prayer and meditation, of reflection and study, a place where your relationship with God is renewed and strengthened.

But a sheepfold is not a place to stay permanently! A sheepfold is a place to come in and let your spirit be filled, but then you go out again!

Christ the gatekeeper opens the gate so that we can go out through the gate, which is also Christ, back out into the world that can be dangerous, but Christ the shepherd is watching over you!

Christ the Lamb of God is also one of us, part of the flock, experiencing the same dangers, the same struggles, the same hunger and thirst that we do.

Sheep face many dangers. A predator might attack. They might wander off and get lost. They might slip and fall on a steep path. They might even go over a cliff! They could eat something poisonous, get something tangled up in their wool, they might get too cold or too hot. Maybe there won't be enough water or enough grass to eat.

We are no safer than sheep. We might be victims of violence. We might be involved in a car crash or a hit and run accident. Our priorities might get twisted. We might get caught up in just trying to keep ahead of the bills. We might become greedy or selfish or insecure. We might lose our jobs, our spouses, our children, our faith.

We might forget that Christ is always in front of us, leading us as a shepherd leads the sheep. We might forget that Christ is the gatekeeper, keeping us safe. We might forget that Christ is the gate.

Christ is the gate.

At the end of this passage, Christ says that he is the gate so that we can go in and out and find pasture. He's not the gate to keep us all locked up and safe from harm every minute of our lives. We have a place of safety with him so that we can rest in his presence, but he doesn't stay in the sheepfold all the time, and neither do we.

We go in and out. Out in the world where there are, in fact, dangers and troubles and suffering and pain.

Christ the gate is not a locked gate. Christ the shepherd does not allow us to stay safely locked away. The sheepfold, if it were locked, would become a prison. It would become a place where we stop growing and get too fat and comfortable and lazy.

Christ the shepherd calls to us, leads us out into the world. He doesn't promise us safety and comfort. He promises to be with us always.

Here in the church we are sometimes too safe, too comfortable. It's easy to stay here together, loving each other, enjoying each other's company, not having to do much except be together, here in the sheepfold.

There is a voice telling us "stay here, stay inside the sheepfold where it's safe and where we have plenty of everything that we need."

But I am not sure I recognize that voice! I think maybe a thief or a robber has gotten in by some other way and not the gate! A thief called laziness. A robber called comfortable.

No, the voice I recognize is saying something different! I hear the words, "Come out and feed my sheep!" I hear, "Go and serve the needy." I hear "The fields are ripe for harvest. Come out and work!" I hear "I came to bring you abundant life, which is out here, in the green pasture, outside of the sheepfold!"

The voice is saying the same thing to all of us! We come in to the church, the sheepfold, to rest and refresh our spirits! To be safe and cared for, for a little while, but we can't stay here all the time! WE MUST GO OUT and find pasture, find the harvest, find the energy and the strength that comes from being in service to the world!

Some of us have been called to go serve God's children in Mississippi. I think it's very possible that some of us heard the voice of Christ when Pastor Romy was speaking to us on Friday night!

Some of us have heard Christ's voice calling us to serve closer to home, and so we serve the children of Bayside and the hungry who come to Bayside for food.

Some of us volunteer at Soup Kitchens and food banks, or by walking in the MS Walk, or by handing a couple dollars or a care kit to the homeless on the street. Some of us sponsor others who are called to missions, helping out of our financial resources.

All of us can do SOMETHING! None of us are meant to stay in that sheepfold all the time!

If we stay inside, the food will soon run out. There is no water in the sheepfold. Our spirits will shrivel and die.

Spiritual growth requires time spent in the green pastures, in the fields that are ripe for harvest, time spent in caring for the sheep of the field, time spent living the abundant life that God intends for us to have.

It is now 7 weeks until some of us will travel to Mississippi. By then, the flood waters will have receded and the clean-up will have gotten started for the people who live along the Mississippi River.

The people whose homes are now underwater will have found just how much has been washed away, and how much, if anything, they have left. Some of them will not have a home to go back to.

The floodgates have been opened and the water is washing many things away. Hearts will be broken to lose home, their safe place, their familiar place, but I know that at least some people will say something like, "We lost everything, but at least we are all safe!"

Some people said the same thing after Katrina. Some people say the same thing after every disaster.

And they are right, that the priority is on human life, not on things.

The whole image of floodgates that open and shut to control how much flooding there is and the allegory of Christ as the gate and the gatekeeper are connected in my mind now, because I spent this week considering both the news and the scripture.

And while I am not saying the floods are a good thing---not at all!---- the connection between the floods and the scripture helps me to understand something more about Christ and God's grace.

Instead of visualizing the sheep and the shepherd, I would like to remember instead the rush of water when the floodgates are opened. Powerful, unstoppable, covering everything in its path, the water will not be denied, will not be turned aside, will not be stopped!

God's grace can come washing over us so powerfully that we are swept away, overwhelmed by its power. Like the floodwaters, it will not be stopped!

Whatever we have considered as important, as necessary, can be gone, taken away by the grace of God.

Our priorities change, our thinking changes, our understanding can become completely different when we experience the grace of God for ourselves.

God's grace means that we receive more of God's goodness than we deserve, and more than that, more goodness and mercy than we could ever have imagined!

God's grace comes crashing over us like a huge wave of water. We cannot stand up against it. We cannot deny it. We are carried away, out of the sheepfold and out into the green pastures!

Christ the gatekeeper opens the floodgate of grace so that we can be swept away, overwhelmed, by the grace of God. Our feet will no longer be on the ground. We will relinquish control to God, to Christ who is the gate, the channel for God's grace to flow through.

Do you know what I am talking about? Have you ever been overwhelmed that way?

Last week I spoke to you about recognizing Christ when he is standing right in front of you. This week I am talking about the times when Christ is undeniably, unforgettably with you! And there is nothing to do at those times but be grateful for the abundant life that Christ has brought you----a life not spent cooped up inside of the way-too-safe sheepfold, but out in the flooded pasture, swimming in the waters of God's grace, washed and clean.

What do we do in gratitude for the gift of God's overwhelming grace?

I can't answer that exactly, because it is personal to you, to your call from Christ to feed his sheep.

In gratitude we can live an abundant, full, active life responding to the voice of Christ. In gratitude we can serve God by serving others. In gratitude we can draw closer to the heart of God, seeing others through the eyes of Christ, loving others with the heart of Christ.

