

“The Gateway to Abundant Life”

John 10:1-10

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My life changed when my father was diagnosed with colon cancer. Until the time of his diagnosis, we had an unspoken truce in our relationship, the truce being we would not discuss the two years of distance and estrangement that had previously occurred in our relationship. I was well aware that our relationship could be restored and as strong as it previously had been by “clearing the air” between us. I knew that Christians are “reconciliation people” and that I should be initiating a conversation. Even though I knew this, whenever I experienced a nudge from the Holy Spirit to do it, I thought, “I don’t feel ready to do that” or “I will get around to it one of these days.” Playing it safe was so much easier than risking such a conversation. My Dad’s diagnosis made me realize his days were numbered so I broached the subject with him. My Dad responded with grace as I have shared with you before. Forgiveness was offered and received, love exchanged and our relationship strengthened. My Dad’s cancer diagnosis was a “divine kick in the pants”, if you will, that pushed me out of comfortable complacency in the relationship towards reconciliation. Thanks be to God for that push because it moved me to the “Abundant life” that characterized our relationship for the rest of his life.

It is that kind of push that is described in today’s scripture passage but it is hidden, disguised if you will, by a weak translation. Before we get to the translation, however, let’s focus on the sheep and sheepfold imagery Jesus uses in this passage.

Jesus speaks of a shepherd, his sheep and the sheepfold to describe himself and his relationship with us. The problem with that image is that most of us have not had experience with sheep or shepherding. The closest we have come to sheep is wearing wool clothing. When in Scotland, I did see sheep dotting the lush green landscapes but I did not get close enough to inspect how smelly or supposedly dumb they were. We are at a disadvantage with the whole shepherding imagery so let me paint a picture for you. Imagine with me a rolling countryside, dotted with small hills. Twilight falls and the shepherd leads his flock into the sheepfold. One of the

hills has been hollowed out, and the sheep huddle inside next to the sheep of several other shepherds who share this particular fold. A pair of piled rock walls extends out a few feet from the sides of the hill. The shepherd lies down in the space between the low walls, effectively sealing the enclosure. Thieves and bandits and wolves will have a difficult time getting in with the shepherds on guard. The sheep are safe in the sheepfold.

When the shepherd arises the next morning, Jesus explains, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." The sheep can't spend their whole lives in the sheepfold, no matter how safe and comfortable it is, because they need food. The sheep have to leave the sheepfold following the shepherd in order to find sustenance, in order to live. Jesus' choice of words here in the Greek is significant but the English translation disguises the special word Jesus uses. "When he has **brought out** all his own, he goes ahead of them," says Jesus in the translation we use in church. "Brought out" is an extremely weak translation of a Greek word that appears over and over again in the Gospels.

The same Greek word is used every time Jesus **casts out** a demon. Jesus with all authority under heaven and earth says, **GO!**, and demons flee.

The same Greek word is used when Jesus makes a whip and **throws** the moneychangers out of the temple. He overturns their tables and wreaks "holy havoc" as he commands, "**Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!**" Do you think Jesus uses his "inside" voice? Jesus, the Good Shepherd—meek and mild??? Not that day in the Temple!

The same Greek word is used when Jesus speaks of **driving out** the "ruler of this world." Every time this word is used in the Gospel, it demonstrates energy and action: Jesus is pushing, pulling, throwing, yanking, driving, exorcising, casting out. But in this verse about the shepherd and the sheep, the translators decided a nice, safe, neutral translation was better. The shepherd simply "brings" his sheep out of the fold. We have only to recall the other times Jesus used this verb in his ministry to realize something gets lost in the translation in this verse.

Perhaps those "not so intelligent" sheep docilely file out from the sheepfold every morning when the shepherd beckons but Jesus

is, of course, not talking about real sheep. He is talking about you and me. He is talking about calling us—saying the word that will coax, cajole or drive us from our sheepfolds—those places of comfort and safety that we have built up around us. At the same time, there is another Spirit at work seducing us into believing it is best to stay put in our safe, comfortable sheepfolds. Reconciliation can be put off for another day. Have another drink. Watch another show.

I don't know about you, but I need to be pushed, pulled, thrown, yanked, and driven out of my comfortableness and complacency towards abundant life.

I was content for several years to bump along in a less than satisfactory relationship with my Dad. Our relationship simply existed rather than being affirming and life-giving for either of us. I didn't sweat being proactive in reconciliation. I simply settled into my sheepfold not even realizing how detrimental it was to my life. I didn't notice because my heart and spirit were safe and comfortable. Then the diagnosis came and I could no longer put off the pulling and pushing that God had been doing for some time. God drove me out of my sheepfold towards an abundant life. I thank God for getting my attention. I thank God for pulling me kicking and screaming through the gate, away from complacency towards an abundant life in relationship to both my Dad and God.

This is Easter's resurrection message we continue to celebrate – that life cannot be conquered by sin, death or the powers of darkness. Jesus, our Redeemer, continues to call us from our safe enclosures to live fully, abundantly, eternally. Remember Jesus' declaration, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Of course, we don't have to believe that or live that or put it to the test. We can simply retreat to the safety and comfort of our individual sheepfolds—whatever—they may be and refuse to participate in the fullness of a life lived in God. We can choose a "sheltered" life but in doing so we recognize it is a life lived less than abundantly, fully, wholehearted, it is a life in which one simply exists. Existing in the sheepfold is easier, of course, and less demanding. But existence is not life. Ease does not bring joy. And less demanding often means less fulfilling.

To experience the fullness of life that Christ offers we have to move outside our safe, comfortable enclosures. Christ drives us out of the sheepfold so that our lives have the opportunity to grow, so that we may experience God's magnificent abundance. Is your life

abundant in the ways Jesus intends? What, if anything, keeps you from living life abundantly?

During this season of Easter, join God in the abundant life found in the Resurrection. Listen for the voice of the shepherd calling you by name, calling you out of complacency. And give Christ the chance to cast you out of your sheepfold so that you may find the fullness of a life lived in the abundance of God. Amen.