

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, MAY 3, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Old Barnyard Gate"

Based on John 10:1-10

My grandmother's house was set in well back from the gravel country road, surrounded by farm animals, a barnyard, a creek, and all the other bits and bobs that make a barnyard, a barnyard. At the road, was an old, weathered gate, that had to be latched and unlatched each time you entered or left. It was quite the ritual. You would pull into the lane off the road, someone would hop out and unlatch the gate, raise it up a bit and swing it open, the car would pass through, stop again, and the person would scurry behind to shut the gate, latch it securely, hop back into the car, and the short bumpy ride up to the house would finish the adventure.

I still remember the time my parents asked me to get out and open the gate. It was late at night, with only the stars to light the way; crickets chirping in the long grass, frogs croaking in the creek, and cattle mooing nearby. I was equally thrilled and terrified at the same time: to be thought of as grown up enough to handle the gate, but at the same time, terrified of just how dark, dark is, in the countryside. As a teenager, I was bored with the whole process. Then one day, the gate

was gone. No longer needed: the animals sold. I will always remember the warm memories of the routine of latching that gate, and the even warmer welcome, always received, at the tiny house up the lane.

We believers have fought long and hard through history, arguing about "Who's in" and "Who's out", when it comes to finding our way to salvation. In the Middle Ages, wars were started because of it. The breaking away of the Protestant Church at Reformation, some five hundred years ago, was, in part, because of the same debate. Not that it helped much! The reason we have so many different denominations today, is, in part, because of the very same discussion: "Who's in, and who's not?"

Some churches, these days, are still quite clear about what allows you to be 'in' or 'out.' If your 'moment of salvation' does not meet their criteria, then you are out. For other churches, if you are a woman, or live a lifestyle or family arrangement that does not meet their expectations, then you are out. You can worship, yes, but you cannot lead others. But before you start to puff out your chest too much, we Presbyterians don't really have too much to gloat about. We're

getting better at sharing our pew, but we are still living with the legacy of a time, when communion was only for members 'in good standing' (whatever that means, and whoever decided it) and we continue to wrestle with opinions and polity about who can be baptized, married, and buried. These are all variations of the same theme: "Who's in" and "Who's not."

A little closer to home, I know that many of you pray for, and worry over, those in your families and in your close friendships, for which the church life, and a journey of faith hold little value. Quietly, from time to time, you approach me and ask, "What may come of them, as the future unfolds?" And my mind wanders back to that old weathered gate.

At first glance, it would appear that John's message was quite simple: "You'd better be in the pen at the end of the day."

"Safe and secure from all alarms."

~Leaning on the Everlasting Arms

It would seem to be straight forward:

In the pen: saved.

Outside the pen: in trouble.

But then I think of Christ standing at the gate.

The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (v3)

His hands release the latch; He moves the gate ajar, steps aside, and invites you to enter. In order to do that, Christ has one foot in the pen, and one foot outside the pen; one foot in the heavenly realm, one foot in the world.

You see, Christ is neither 'in' nor 'out'. He is both. He wishes for you, of course, to be safe and secure and 'saved' in the pen, for He knows, as you and I and all people of faith know, there is so much more when you have the "full" (v10) understanding of Him. But the gate ajar would suggest that Christ is also there for those still outside the gate:

- Those lurking nearby,
- Those watching carefully and quietly,
- Those too timid to approach,
- Those bruised and battered,
- Those feeling ashamed and unworthy.

Christ does not only smile upon those in the pen or those who march quickly into the fold.

Christ does not turn His back on those who have not yet, found the gate.

Christ leaves the gate ajar, and beacons the world to come a little closer: to listen, to see, to get a glimpse of what could be, of what 'being full of Christ' means.

My friends, these are interesting days. And I am noticing some very encouraging things happening near the gate, which stands ajar.

- I am noticing people walking together: couples and families that were too busy before the quarantine, with their after school activities and after work committee meetings.
- I am hearing of families having dinner together again on Sunday nights: over Zoom, or over Messenger or Facebook Live.
- I am hearing of people writing letters, sending photos over their cell phones, stopping to chat about more than just the weather.
- I am getting inquiries from those on the definite 'no-church, no faith, all hogwash' side of the gate asking for the link to Livestream, and in search of connecting with others in meaningful ways, "because I know you have something to do with church stuff."

Are these not signs of Christ's foot in the world, drawing in weary souls, gently, patiently, a little closer to the gate?

- Is this not an amazing opportunity for our church, to show the world out there, that we are not boring, dull, and outdated, but a relevant

and meaningful place in the community?

- Is this not an amazing opportunity for each of us, to pray fervently that these whispers of awakening will remain with people after this crisis is over?
- Is this not an amazing opportunity to encourage our families to hold on to some of these new habits, which will make their connections and stability stronger over time?

Perhaps the question is not, "Who's in" and "Who's not." Perhaps the questions, is "Do you have your hand on the latch?"

- Can you, "Live in this world, and rest in the fold with your Saviour?"
- Can you stand at the gate, and leave it ajar for others to follow?
- Can you search for glimpses of glory in these strange times, and look for ways to coax, nudge, whisper and wait?

Christ needs you, right now, yes, in the middle of these difficult days: to stand at the gate, to lift the latch, and to keep watch while the gate is ajar.

Can He depend on you, today?