

“Living in a Gated Community”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
April 30, 2023 - Fourth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10](#)

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”
(William Sloane Coffin).

I hope that as you made your way into the sanctuary this morning, you were filled with pride, knowing that you were coming in to the church to gather as a *very exclusive community*. As you heard in our gospel lesson from John, we belong indeed to an exclusive community, a *gated* community, one that is led by Christ, who is both the Good Shepherd of our flock and the one who serves as the Gate to our grazing grounds.

If you were able to join us for worship last Sunday, you heard in the sermon about how our exclusive, gated community is to be an open and *inclusive* one, where all are welcome to participate in our acts of fellowship, worship, and witness in the world. We are reminded of our church community’s commitment to having an inclusive fellowship when we gather and hear our welcome statement being read, and we seek to be faithful in honoring our commitment as we strive to become a more extravagantly welcoming community.

We seek to become more welcoming because we followers of one who welcomes all. Jesus Christ is the Gate who opens wide a pathway in to a place where God lovingly provides ever-verdant, life-sustaining pastures and still and quiet waters that quench our thirst for peace. Christ welcomes all to come in to this pasture and live a more blessed life because that was the heart of Jesus’ ministry as he lived among us. He welcomed all -- the lofty and the lowly, the insider and the outcast, the faithful and the faithless -- to receive the gift of life that God freely offers to all.

This welcoming way he demonstrated so perfectly at the Last Supper he shared with his disciples. Those who gathered for that meal were hardly a saintly band of followers as they would all abandon the one who broke bread with them just hours after he fed them. One of them didn’t even make it through the meal

before rushing out to betray him. One of them, their leader, that very night would come to deny three times that he even knew Jesus. And yet this very imperfect band of wayward and wandering sheep were gathered and fed by their Shepherd *just as they were*.

The extravagant hospitality Jesus showed to betrayers, deniers, and abandoners, he shows to all of us. Like the first disciples, we are welcomed in and fed by our Shepherd just as we are. And as the sheep are called to come in and gather not only to be fed, but to learn how to become like the Shepherd, we seek to follow his way of offering an extravagant welcome to all people; the way of the Shepherd is to be the way of the sheep. Our exclusive community is to be an inclusive community.

But while all *people* are to be welcomed, all *behaviors* are not. The Gate is closed as a protective barrier to keep out behaviors that, like ravenous wolves among a flock of defenseless sheep, will cause harm to come to the flock. Still, Jesus envisioned such destroyers coming upon the flock, calling them thieves and bandits who will gain entrance to the pasture but not by the loving, welcoming way of the Gate.

We know too well that too many destructive, life-robbing behaviors that should be excluded from our communities have instead been included and adopted by us. The conquering way of the empire, long ago, climbed over the walls of the sheep pen, and when Christians, once lowly and often-persecuted, came to power, the way of the conqueror too often became the way of the sheep.

Our understanding of Christ changed as well from him being emphasized as the protecting and providing Good Shepherd and life-sacrificing Lamb who was slain to the Church focusing on him as *Christus Invictus*, the unconquered and victorious Christ. The good news that we celebrate in this Easter season that Christ is unconquered and victorious over sin and death, and Christ's way of love is unconquered and victorious as well, but the Christian imagining of Jesus the Conqueror has gone way beyond seeing him as victorious in these ways, and we have viewed him as leading us in battle against all kinds of earthly enemies. In the name of the conquering Christ, many groups of Christians have engaged in all kinds of terribly destructive behavior, seeking not to welcome people who are different, but to subdue them. Sadly, this way did not cease with the ending of

the crusades or European conquest in the Americas or the ending of the enslavement of Native American people and many from Africa, but continues to often in our ways of seeking to subdue and control, rather than to welcome, our neighbor. The call to win, to conquer or coerce others, no matter the cost, is a strong call that we hear today from preachers and politicians alike, but it is a call we should reject. We are called to follow instead the way of the Good Shepherd, which is always the way of welcoming love.

So may our exclusive community become even more inclusive of all kinds of people. But may we cast out any violent, destructive, selfish ways that have climbed over the walls and have found themselves living in our midst. May our community look all the more like the ideal community described in the Book of Acts, in which we were told that “all who believed were together and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44), worshipping together, praying together, breaking bread together, giving together, and growing together. As the Good Shepherd leads us into the greener pastures of greater love, may we faithfully follow and so move forward together in faith and life. Amen.