

**May 3, 2020 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23**  
**John 10:1-10**

[Amy Frykholm in Worship through a wall from the Christian Century, April 22, 2020.  
Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus, I am the Gate, posted on April 26, 2020 and drawing on Frykholm's article.  
Working Preacher-assorted.]

**Grace and peace, courage to you beloved of Christ Jesus. Amen.**

**I've recently been learning about the "border church".**

Since 2008 an ever-evolving community led by a Methodist pastor

has gathered to share Holy Communion, to break bread.

They meet at the bi-national International Friendship Park.

The park itself is a round plaza, bisected by the Mexico US border, half on the US side, half on the Mexico side.

It's 15 miles south of San Diego, on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, in a land of sloughs and estuaries, reached by winding through Border Field State Park.

In some seasons you can drive all way to Friendship Park, most of the year you walk the last 1.6 miles.

At first, back in the 1848, at the end of the Mexican American War,

there was just a monument on the beach.

Later came a barbed wire fence and families met there to see one another.

Now it's a thick steel mesh through which fingertips can just barely reach and touch.

**In spite of custom's rules** that prohibit passing things across the border,

in the beginning, as a protest of sorts, the faithful community that gathered—some on the US side, some on the Mexico side—passed and shared Holy Communion, Christ's body, Christ's blood.

Over the years, with the shifting winds of Homeland Security,

the community has adapted: sometimes able to share the peace pinky to pinky,

sometimes forced to stand 50 feet apart and worship via cell phone,

now in this era of COVID and the park closed, worshipping with technology like Zoom and Facebook.

**Today we call Good Shepherd Sunday.**

Many years on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter we hear Jesus declare, "I am the good shepherd," ready to lay down his life for the sheep.

This year we hear the words that come just before that, not quite so poetic: I am the gate.

Honestly, I've often struggled with this passage.

It has hit my ears as exclusionary, with tricky strangers who are to be feared.

Reading it, it's confusing: So who are you, Jesus? The gate? The gatekeeper? The shepherd?

Who are we in the story? Always the safe sheep? Sometimes the sneaky bandits?

Where are we? Inside, in privileged safety? Outside, for we wandered?

I value the gates that keep kids and dogs in the yard, but this gate image isn't one I turn to quickly.

For me, it doesn't immediately say freedom; it's often been used to exclude, to narrow the flock.

**But reading it again**, thinking about that "border church," sharing the peace pinky to pinky,

**I'm seeing Jesus the Gate not as one who shuts out, but as one who welcomes across.**

Jesus doesn't wall us in, even if we may feel trapped in these COVID quarantine days.

**Truly, truly Jesus beckons us across the threshold, pinky to pinky, Zoom to Zoom, human voice to human voice, love which will not let us go.**

Some historians remind us that when sheep were gathered into a sheepfold the shepherd might very well lie down in that opening, sleeping across the gateway, offering their bodies as safety.

I think of Jesus the gate with the Spirit's power in this way: as a conduit, a holy link across time and space, who eases our fears, who widens our view, who feeds our hunger.

Not physically crossing, not when it's too dangerous, but still crossing, still reaching, still loving.

Jesus the gate moves in between and across.

All for the sake of life, life abundant.

Not scarcity, but abundance; not exclusion, but an open door.

**With this wider sense of Jesus crossing the breach, let's look at the other readings.**

They remind us who God is.... and who we are.

**Psalm 23 is so beloved and well-known.**

What do we read at the bedside as one nears death? It's quite often Psalm 23.

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.*

Take a deep breath. In all of this, God is our shepherd.

Then it goes on: *Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil.*

That valley is seeming closer, more real for all of us, but especially for patients and staff on the front line.

The Psalm continues: *For you are with me.*

Did you know that in the Hebrew, precisely in the middle of this Psalm, 26 words in, with 26 more that follow, we find that line? ***For you are with me. Thou art with me.***

In the valley, in the fear, in the exhaustion, in the pain: **You are with me.**

Here the Psalm turns: instead of talking about God, now talking to God.

For *you* are with me, *your* rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
*You prepare a table*, an edgeless table, a table of plenty, of enough.  
In all the uncertainty, all the stressors, all the what-ifs, all the messiness:  
God our shepherd is providing enough, simply enough.  
That's grace, friends, grace overflowing.

**The reading from Acts is another one we can look to.**

While the Psalm reminded us who God is, **Acts reminds us who we are**, how we practice our faith.  
*They devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer,*  
*they had all things in common, sharing as any had need.*

In these weeks I've been asked often, how is University Lutheran Church of Hope doing?  
This passage comes to mind.

I'm not surprised by your faithfulness and creativity, by your prayers.  
I'm not surprised by your spirit of trust and flexibility.  
I'm not surprised by the phone calling and reaching out and breaking bread.  
I'm not surprised, but I AM deeply moved.  
Much of what I've known of this community feels amplified right now.  
And that, dear ones, is sweet and beautiful to witness.

**They had all things in common, sharing as there was need.**

Let me just name today two ways I've seen this in the last weeks:  
Many of you have been creating and donating facemasks—300 and counting.  
These have gone to care centers like Lyngblomsten and Walker.  
They've been given to Families Moving Forward and our neighbors who are homeless.  
They've been sent with love to Namibia, and to Oregon, and donated closer to home.  
When supplies run short, there's this sharing of stashes.  
It turns out Ann RXXXX has a wealth of elastic, who knew?!  
She told me that so far she's shared 244 yards of elastic, and there is still plenty more!  
They shared as there was need.

**This pandemic is clarifying what is broken in our economic system,**

what can't return to "normal," what needs revision, radical new life.  
Did you know that as stimulus checks are being sent out, nearly 200,000 Minnesotans haven't and won't receive one?

Those who are undocumented or who live with someone who is undocumented aren't eligible.

In the spirit of equity and sharing things in common, ISAIAH and a bunch of organizations are re-distributing the stimulus money through the **Minnesota Immigrant Families Covid 19 Fund**.

If you find yourself with enough, I invite you to join our family in this option.

**Many have asked when we'll come together to worship in person.**

I don't know, that's the truth of it.

We're looking to the wisdom from scientists and leaders around the country and the world.

It turns out singing is a particularly easy way to spread the virus.

Between gathering a crowd and many who are at risk,

in person worship will be a while, deep into the summer, I'd guess.

I know that some will say, but I'm young, I'm healthy, the risk isn't as high.

While that may be true, we're still a community and that implies a certain solidarity,

a commitment to one another and to one another's health.

I know it's painful to be apart, we miss much—that's real and I feel it too.

Like distance, like staying home, it's a sacrifice we make in love for each other.

In the meantime, we'll consider ways for small groups to gather, perhaps outside, with distance, with masks.

**When a friend stopped by this week**, standing on the porch, wearing a mask, I confess I wanted to break all the guidelines.

My instinct was to invite them in. My instinct was to hug.

I didn't, I know how this virus works, but that was my instinct.

What a complex tension within us! Fear of illness, even death, and at once the yearning to connect

That tension has gotten me in touch with the border church, with the human desire to share the peace pinky to pinky, with the hunger to reach out and break bread together across all that could separate us.

It's gotten me in touch with Jesus the gate,

with Jesus who reaches and invites and welcomes, across our fear.

**Gates and borders: we could see only crime and fear, hopelessness, death.**

But John Fanestil, the pastor of the border church in Friendship Park, says he shows up each Sunday to practice the "true nature of the border."

Sharing Holy Communion, "we know [the border]" he says, "as a place of encounter, exchange, friendship, and fellowship."

Dear friends in Christ, even in our distance, Jesus is drawing us out,

across the borders that divide, through the valley, to a table overflowing.  
Jesus the shepherd is inviting us to deeper practice, re-imagining our usual systems,  
naming the need, stretching the love, sharing the grace.  
Today, this week, may Jesus' grace meet you where you are,  
keep you for this journey, and take you where you need to go. Amen.