
Leadership: The Shepherd and The Gate

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter 4 – Year A**

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ...The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ... He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice....Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. (John 10:2-7)

This sermon is about immune systems, leadership, gates, and life!

During these past several weeks, I have pondered leadership a lot. I don't mean, so much, the leadership of others, though that, too, has crossed my mind. I mean, rather, my own leadership. And I have been considering the leadership that every one of us has been trying to exercise in this season of being homebound in a pandemic, in the captivity of our own homes.

Some of us are trying to manage families and households. Some of us are trying to manage businesses and institutions. Some of us are trying to manage roommates and housemates. Some of us are trying to manage ourselves. In all those situations, each of us is a leader of some sort. How can we effectively lead during this season of pandemic anxiety and social distance?

It is astounding these days how much the world has slowed down. Much of the economy has simply stopped. Our time is rather like a huge silent retreat, in a monastery maybe, where the disciple simply stops for a while, stops engaging others, stops watching TV or the news. The disciple retreats. Okay, okay, I know! Some of us are in a huge, NOISY retreat!

In either case, strong and deep truths emerge in such retreats. These are retreats, not from the world, but retreats into oneself. The retreat into the soul, whether forced or unforced, changes people. I know that this present day retreat is a mostly forced, unintentional, involuntary, retreat! And maybe a noisy one! Thus, especially, the discoveries during this retreat may not be recognizable without a guide, a mentor.

It is the role of a leader to be a guide, to be a mentor, to be a retreat priest, during this retreat. It is the role of any leader during this time, to be a shepherd. To help people go in, and go out, of their interior journey.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, for sure. But the intriguing passage we hear in today's Gospel presents Jesus as the Gate, in particular. The Gate is the guide, the one who allows the follower to go in safely, and to go out safely.

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ...The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ...He goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow because they know his voice.Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep" (John 10:2-7).

Jesus provides a deep parable for leadership here in the Gospel of John, chapter 10. Yes, we usually think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, one of Christianity's paramount examples of caring and comforting and firm and gentle leadership. And the Good Shepherd is a deservedly strong metaphor!

But in this passage Jesus says he is the Gate! Jesus helps the disciple on retreat to go in and out, to distinguish between our true self and our non-self.

Have you also been thinking about immunity and immune systems during this homebound pandemic? Well, I

am thinking of how Ed Friedman once described leadership as a healthy immune system.

Ed Friedman was a family systems therapist who spoke wisely about the ministry of “non-anxious presence.” He worked extraordinarily well with leaders of all sorts, from families in crisis to churches in crisis. Being a “non-anxious presence” goes something like this: Do not avoid people in their illness or stress, and do not deny their crisis; but be present with people in their stress without amplifying that anxiety. Friedman taught us that effective leaders reduce stress by living out their own ability to live non-anxiously, often in the very midst of an anxious situation.

And, yes, Ed Friedman once described leadership as a healthy immune system.

It's here, in one of his brilliant books, *A Failure of Nerve*. He makes some of his usual points here, that leadership can be a kind of electrical current transformer, like those we see along our electric grid. A transformer either steps up, or steps down, the electric current, often stepping it down so that the electricity does not explode our house. An effective leader does not step up the electric current and amplify the anxiety of a system; and effective leader reduces the anxiety of a system, while still allowing the current to go through. Yes, like a good shepherd does.

But, in particular, here in this book (*A Failure of Nerve*), Friedman says that good leadership is a healthy immune system. He develops this analogy from the study of modern immunology. Friedman notes that, in the human body, “the immune response is the capacity to distinguish self from non-self” (page 180), and “the immune system is considered to have a more fundamental role than protection: namely, providing an organism with integrity” (Page 180).

So it is in our body politic, or in our family body, or in our church body, or in our own, personal emotional body; a good leader is an immune system. Friedman says, “It is ultimately the nature of the leader's presence that is the source of their real strength [their strength is not economic or physical or by virtue of their office]. Leaders function as the immune systems of the institutions they lead – not because they ward off enemies, but because they supply the ingredients for the system's integrity” (page 231).

Leadership, your own leadership in these captive times, is to supply the ingredients for your system's integrity. A system's integrity depends upon knowing when to bring in, and when to bring out – like a gate, really. How to distinguish true self from non-self.

The hypodermic needle does not make you immune! Well, it may contain ingredients one day that will make us immune to a physical virus. But what really strengthens us spiritually, in this time, is our sense of self, our self-differentiated non-anxious presence, paying attention to what is strong, and not giving over our resources to what is weak!

Jesus is the Gate. Bringing sheep safely in, to home and to comfort and security and safety. But also encouraging sheep out, out safely and securely into the world. A gate is the regulator, allowing things in, and allowing things out. A Gate is like the governor on an engine, measuring and regulating the speed of the engine. A Gate is the transformer in an electric circuit, stepping down the current, regulating the anxiety.

Jesus is the Gate, a paramount model of the healthy immune system, keeping us alive by focusing on what is healthy in our organisms. Focus on the health! “I came,” said Jesus, that you might have life, and have it abundantly! (John 10:10).

That is the leadership that each of us has an opportunity to exercise, no matter what system or institution we are managing these days – our families, our households, our businesses, our institutions, or our internal emotional selves.

And it is also the leadership that we, the Christian Church, are called to exercise in the world, during a time of crisis. Our ministry of non-anxious presence, self-regulating health, is truly an essential business in our time! In times of crisis and stress, the Church offers, and models, a deep, non-anxious presence, and the positive energy of peace.

You – we! – are the Body of Christ, delivering spiritual peace and steady, healthy, confidence to a stressful world. We do that in the spiritual power of Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Gate. This is a spiritual power that does not deny reality and truth – we do not deny scientific facts and realities, for instance; we learn from them!—but we also draw from an inner grace and love by which God created, and still creates, and sustains, the world.

Like Jesus, we are here so that the world can have life, and can have it abundantly!

AMEN.

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