

A Full Life
John 10:1-15
May 7, 2017 – Fourth Sunday of Easter

The “I am” sayings of Jesus are unique to John’s gospel and are a key to Jesus’ identity. Indeed, to the first century Jew, the very words “I am” were sacred. You see, in the third chapter of Exodus, when Moses faced the burning bush, when he was called by God to go back to Egypt, and lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity, Moses asked, “What should I tell them when they ask who sent me?” And the voice of the Lord replied, “I am who I am. Tell them I AM sent you.”(Ex 3:14) Indeed the sacred name of God, Yahwah, is drawn for the Hebrew verb “to be” – *hayah*. Thus, for Jesus to make statements beginning with those very words – “I AM” is a statement of divinity. Thus, to the practicing first century Jew, who did not believe Jesus was divine, it was a statement of blasphemy. But to John, the Gospel writer and his late first century audience, it was a statement of truth -- Jesus is the “I AM.” Jesus is divine. Jesus is the Son of God.

Throughout Lent, we heard several times Jesus’ statement: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” We also heard, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” But, in today’s Gospel lesson, there are two I AM statements. There is the more common one – “I am the good shepherd.” Most of us have heard it before. Jesus is the shepherd, and we are his sheep. Where Jesus leads, we will follow. Jesus calls us by name, and we follow because we know his voice. And of course, that statement that is so much a part of Holy Week and this holy season – “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”(John 10:11) It is that statement of Jesus as the Good Shepherd that ties this Gospel Reading to the twenty-third psalm:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.

What a wonderful image! What a truly beautiful image!

But there’s another I AM saying in today’s reading, and it’s much less common. Jesus says, “I am the gate.” Okay. We read that the sheep come and go through the gate, and they find good pasture. But “the bad guys”... “The bad guys” don’t enter through the gate. The thieves, they grab the sheep and drag them over the wall. The gate. . . The gate is the way to the good life. Jesus says, “I am

the gate”; and in the next verse he says, “I have come so that they [that is the sheep, that is you and me] may have life and have it abundantly.”

Now I’ve read that verse many times before. “I have come so they may have life and have it abundantly.” It’s a nice, churchy, theological kind of statement – Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. That’s nice. It might even be reassuring. But, as I was preparing for this sermon, I happened to read that statement in the Common English Bible translation. It says, “I came so that they could have life – indeed so that they could live life to the fullest.” And I thought “Wow.” “I came so they could live life to the fullest.” That’s right here. That’s a little more real than “have life abundantly.” And so, of course, I went running for my Greek Bible. What does the original Greek say? The word is *perisson*; and, of course, my next step was my Greek dictionary. How should we translate *perisson*? – “superabundantly, exceedingly, over and above, in the excess, overflowing.” Boy I like that interpretation – “I am the gate. I came so they could have life to the fullest. Friends, that is exactly what Jesus Christ offers us – the gate, the way, the opening to life to the fullest.

I have said on numerous times that the greatest gift in the world is the gift of God’s love. It’s a gift that will never die. It’s a gift that will never end. It’s a gift that the more we give away, the more we get; and that’s the gift of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus is the gift of God’s love in the flesh; and Jesus is the gate to a full life.

Have you ever known somebody that kept trying to buy happiness? I have. Through certain professional and personal connections, I’ve been privileged to know some people who were financially very well off – we might call them rich. And I’ve experienced two types of rich people. I’ve experienced those who kept trying to buy happiness, always buying bigger houses, bigger cars, bigger boat, always looking to buy happiness and never finding it. And I’ve experienced other people who have a whole lot of money, but live very modestly and enjoy nothing better than using their wealth to help others in need. But, you know what? You don’t need to be rich to help others in need. You don’t need to be rich to follow the call of Jesus. You don’t need any money to follow the call of Jesus, to enter through the gate, to enter into the fullness of life.

I truly believe that every person has a call from Christ. That call may be as major as a total life change; or it may be as minor as paying a visit, or making a phone call, or dropping a note to someone having a hard time. It may mean a major volunteer effort, or it may simply mean sharing a smile or a kind word. But, as I have repeatedly said, that call means sharing the love of Christ in all we think, in all we say, and in all we do.

John Wesley had three general rules. (I don’t like the word “rules” – they sound like commands. No, for a Christian, they should not be commands or rules;

they should be life-long desires, guidelines to live by.) So John Wesley had three general guidelines for Christian living:

- 1) Do all the good you can for everyone you can in every way you can at every time you can.
- 2) Do no harm. Do no evil.
- 3) Stay in love with God.

That's a pretty good guide for a life in Christ. May each of us answer the call. May each of us follow the good shepherd. May each of us enter through the gate of Christ that we may truly have life to the fullest.

Let us pray. . .

Gracious God,
Help each of us hear your call.
Help us answer that call.
Lead us through the gate to the life you would have us lead,
that we may experience life to the fullest,
in this world and in the world to come.
Amen.

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