

“The Place to Be”

Jeremiah 7:1-7; Hebrews 13:18-21;
John 10:1-15

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
September 2, 2012

Last Thursday afternoon I was feeling like maybe the place I should be was at the Kibbie Dome. It seemed like the place to be. I didn't go, so I will have to depend on others to find out if it really was the place to be. No? It seemed like the place to be ahead of time. I'm not sure it did afterwards.

I got to thinking about where is the place to be, the place we want to be? Why is it that we think about a place to be? There are times when we think, “If only I could be at that place, my life would be better.” One reason we might think that is because that's where the excitement is, that's where it's going on. It's just the place to be.

Perhaps we even think about times where there's a place to be because it's a place to be seen, or it's a place where we can be with the right people, or it's the place to be because it has great beaches and wonderful sun. There are all kinds of reasons we could think about a place as the place to be.

But I realized, as I thought about it, that it's not all about just a physical place to be, is it? Sometimes we think about being there for the people who are there and the actual environment may not matter so much. Then, we also can say things like, “I'm not in a good place right now,” talking about our emotions and psychological space. We're not in a good place.

Where is the place to be? I've heard it said that the place to be is wherever we are, so we're always in the right place. Well, I don't really think so. If you've lived life enough, done enough exploring, enough searching, you recognize that some places are sometimes better than others. Indeed, it feels to me like Jesus, in his conversation with us last week, was saying, “Ask, search, knock. Not every place is the right place to be.” There's a process going on. We need to look for the right place to be. So what is it about that place that makes it right?

It may be a place where we can be with the people we love and know we're loved. That's a great place to be. Or maybe it's a place where we're challenged to grow. There's some good about that place as well. As we go into the scripture today, it feels to me that the undergirding piece, which is not said directly, is that the place to be is in Jesus' care. That's the place to be. In our reading today, we can begin to see why that might be. What is good about being in Jesus' care? What are the things that are valuable about being in Jesus' care?

He describes for us some reasons. One is to be saved, to be rescued, and healed from the things in life that move us toward death instead of life. Are there things in our lives that we need to be rescued from? Sometimes I think I see it in my own life that if I just have the right amount of stuff then I will be happy and successful and my life will be solved. Sometimes I realize I need to be rescued from that because it really leads to nowhere, to an emptiness. I can come up with a number of examples. If I'm just this way, if I'm just that way, if I'm just with the right people, then my life will be fantastic. And yet, I think I need to be rescued from these fantasies. There have been times when I tried them out and I found just how empty they can be.

What do you need to be rescued from? What is it in our lives that we need to be rescued from to realize the life God gives us? That's what we find in Jesus' care. He's the one who rescues us.

Then he goes on to say not only will we be saved, rescued, but we will have our coming in and going out. What does that mean? What I get a sense of, when I'm in a place where I'm free to come and go, is the "free" piece. There's a sense of freedom there. So in Jesus' care, first we have a sense of being rescued, but we also get to know a freedom we don't find in other places. Do you ever feel trapped in life? There are all kinds of things that can trap us. Again, the solutions we try and the things we get ourselves into can take away our freedom. I have felt trapped in jobs before, trapped in situations I felt weren't right. When we find ourselves in Jesus' care there's not a sense of being trapped. It's a freedom. Freedom to come and be the people God made us to be.

What else do we need? We need sustenance, and we find good pastures. There is a sustenance in knowing Christ and being in Christ's care that feeds us. It's one of the reasons we celebrate communion. We recognize the sustenance that we have when we are in Jesus' care.

Finally, there's the suggestion that then we have life, and have it abundantly. So when I think about where's the place I want to be, Jesus is inviting us to come into his care.

The question I've skipped over, in some ways, is how do we get there? Last week Jesus encouraged us to ask, search, and knock, to begin the journey, to come and find out what it's all about. We know that in our lives to make it someplace there are times where we have to go through a gate. We begin to think about how we get to be in Christ's care. How do we get to this place that has all these wonderful attributes? How do we find our way?

Jesus begins by saying that when he goes to the gate as the Good Shepherd, the sheep know his voice. As I understand it, in first century Palestine, oftentimes they made fenced sheepfolds with a gate to protect the sheep at night. Then in the morning the shepherd would come and, by voice, the sheep would follow their shepherd. So, as the shepherd comes, what voice do we listen to? It feels to me that he is saying that there are other voices. What voice do we listen to? Do we know his voice?

He said there are others who come and don't come through the gate. Thieves and bandits. He is saying there are some illegitimate voices that don't really guide us. I would say that even picking those two terms fits with stealing sheep. But if we think about it, a thief is all about having things, so one side of it is about the stuff. We can get trapped in that idea that it's just about stuff. The other is a bandit. Now, I've always thought that bandit and thief were pretty much the same thing. But "bandit" could also be translated as "insurrectionist," which could be interesting because I think what it's saying is there's this sense where we feel that we need to be part of a revolution to make our life different. Revolution oftentimes is on the banditry side—that is, the rules shouldn't matter. In fact, there is a line of thought that suggests that if we break the rules, there is where we will find life. It seems to me that in our society there's a sense that it's the bad boys and bad girls that have all the fun. I think that's way off base. I think true joy in life is found in goodness.

That's just thievery and banditry. What's behind those voices, Jesus says, is a force that just wants to steal and kill and destroy. Let me try to put that a different way because we don't always think of the voices in our lives in quite such stark terms.

To steal is to take our resources. The word for "kill" could also have been "sacrifice." So it's a force that wants to take our resources and sacrifice us in a way that destroys us. Now you might say, "Who is really doing that to us?"

We don't have as many tobacco ads any more, but I think that's a perfect example of how this works. Tobacco is a product that is sure to impede your health in some way and perhaps even kill you, but it was sold to us as "give your resources for this product, sacrifice your life to look sophisticated, and end up being destroyed." Again, it's a pretty stark example, but I think there are other examples particularly in advertising where we need to watch and be careful because the real purpose of the advertising is to take our resources and not to improve our lives. We have to make sure it's a valuable thing to do and it's not just sacrificing our lives and leading to our own destruction. There are all kinds of voices speaking to us that really don't care about helping us find life, but simply steal, kill, and destroy.

So it matters what voice we listen to. It matters whether we listen to the voice of Christ. Jesus feels that they still aren't quite getting it: the voice of the Good Shepherd come to guide them to salvation. So then he says, "I am the gate. I am the Way," is basically what he's saying. "Come to me and follow. I'll let you out." It's through Christ that we are able to find the life and discern what is right and good, what doesn't kill and sacrifice and destroy, what leads to everlasting life. So it's interesting how many times I have read this and this time it makes some sense to me that he's going in this progression of saying first, "I am the voice. I'm the one who will lead you out. I am the way, the gate." And then, not only is he the gate to get us out, he's the Good Shepherd to follow. There's this progression. He invited us to follow him.

Last week we heard that narrow is the gate to the way of life. Following him takes us down that narrow path. Sometimes I think there's a little push back, saying "It's not all that hard." But just think about our biological life. Do you realize how narrow a range of environments we can live in? If you look at the breadth of temperatures in the universe, we can only live in a narrow range. If you look at the kinds of environment we can live in, it's really a pretty narrow range. There is a narrow way that leads to life and Jesus is inviting us to follow him and know that way; to have life and to have it abundantly. Praise God! Amen.

Gracious God, perhaps you sometimes do see us a little like sheep, wandering, looking for our way. You know we need guidance. We do a lot of blundering around on our own. We are thankful you give us a voice we can trust, one who is the way into relationship with you, leading us to know the wonder of your grace and leading us into life eternal. Let us follow him. Let us know the way. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.