

The ins & outs (11Mar18 – 4Lent)
John 10:1-18, 22-33; Psalm 23

In a disturbing line of thought, I've spent the week contemplating the worst thing to bring to church, the most heretical or anti-religious, the greatest abomination, least fitting our theology.

For example, as we're preparing to update building use policies, including re-examining how we open our doors to our community and neighbors as part of our ministry, my old guideline joke for groups using the space is a hypothetical restriction of asking whether they are going to use the sanctuary to sacrifice goats.

I had not actually been contemplating slaughtering livestock in here today. But have been thinking along those lines, trying to figure out marks that would so clearly indicate this is not our church, not our religion, wrongs which would offend our sense of God or damage our spiritual practice.

Interestingly, obvious symbols of other religions wouldn't seem to step over our line here. We're more likely eager to engage interfaith dialogue, and so not be disturbed by a star of David, or representation of the Prophet Muhammad, or yin yang, or totem pole.

Not exactly a religious image but one thing I believe disturbs the core of our religious identity is an American flag in the sanctuary. I believe that is a confusion of devotion, not so much about blurring church and state, but "God bless America" falsely associating the actions of this country with some sort of divine imperative as aligned with God's will, but a restrictive, diminished view of God's abundant life-giving.

To admit the other side, though, I had long discussions with a beloved shut-in who was a World War 2 veteran who understood the flag to be a sign of sacrifice and love, united against suffering and evil. He had lived through stronger clarity of that symbol. So even if a flag would seem to me idolatrous and disruptive, I recognize the ambiguity that it could be perceived as not immediately offensive and maybe even a positive addition.

Another line of thought would be marketing—maybe a big WalMart ad or Exxon or something. With capitalism, the dollar becomes "almighty," the only time we use that term besides as for the creator of heaven and earth. Although our cash asserts that "In God we trust," usually what we trust most to save us are those financial reserves and not the fiduciary trust in God.

Still, that's also ambiguous, because momentarily we will practice in our offerings not using money for selfish gain or greedy retention, but releasing and sharing it intentionally as a subsidiary tool for God's purposes.

I next considered bringing in a Forward Motion W and marching around in a Bucky Badger costume. That might cut a little closer in terms of questioning our devotion. It's harder at the height of a good season to raise questions of allegiance to sports teams, or to observe our dedication to them as the focal point of our day of rest.

If not that as shocking or contradictory to faith, then I could've brought a gun, an assault rifle. Maybe that's opposed with a sense that our faith should be about safety and security, where that would seem to promote fear. Or that God is the giver of life, but we see weapons as taking away God's gift by killing. Or that it's disparaging and dismissive of what are youth were asking of us earlier this morning.

Or I could've brought blatant symbols of racism.

Or something against our welcome as a Reconciling in Christ congregation.

Or that is domineeringly patriarchal.

Maybe you have more ideas for this crazy notion I've been contemplating.

But for now let's notice an interesting adaptation or change in churches in fairly recent history: the change from orthodoxy to orthopraxy. The central focus is no longer on right belief but right actions, not directly on who God is but on what we do.

The central arguments dividing the church these days (including splits in the past decade in the ELCA) have become ethical questions. Unlike

previous centuries and millennia, it is not who has the ability to be your pastor, if you get to drink wine at communion, what the words of our hymns proclaim, much less how Jesus is fully God and fully human or who goes to heaven or whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father.

You may hardly care about such questions and may write them off as irresolvable and, so, silly disputes. You may not like to say the old major ecumenical creeds because they feel too confining for your belief. Where today's new creed has some emphatic words about our stances, there's little in there arguable about God.* Yet these had been huge battlegrounds, splitting churches, splitting families, even splitting entire continents—and that's fights just within Christian theology.

Okay. So what? I regularly invite you to follow these circuitous routes with me, but this likely feels worse.

So: as Jesus says "I AM the gate. I AM the good shepherd," there's some of this abominable ungodly question lurking around the edge.

This, it says, is the feast of Hanukkah, the feast of the re-dedication of the temple. For history: about two centuries before Jesus, the Greek Seleucid emperor Antiochus IV wanted to show his control, so he got rid of the high priest in the temple and sold the position to a guy who gave up his Jewish name and took the Greek name Jason (a little indicator he wasn't all that interested in preserving holy and faithful practice).

Also for name changes, that emperor added for himself the title "Epiphanes." It might ring in your ear as sounding a like Epiphany, and that's exactly right. We use the word for how Jesus is revealed or made known to us as bearing God's presence. But at that point in the story, the emperor declared it of himself, calling himself the revelation of God. God made manifest.

To grind that in a notch more, he built a new altar inside the temple to sacrifice to a statue of Zeus. A bad dose of mixing politics and religion, this desecration of the temple was understood to ruin the holy presence, eliminating it from serving as the place to approach God. Not only was it breaking commandments against worshipping a graven image, but even more abominably was for the wrong, false god, not making offerings to the true God.

Jewish believers fought for years to reclaim the temple from this "desolating sacrilege," and finally the Maccabees were able to overcome the idolatry, to restore right worship, to re-purify and re-dedicate the temple to God. That's what Hanukkah commemorates.

And what makes it so intriguing as Jesus is in the temple during this festival—what makes the people in the story say it's keeping them in suspense—is an ambivalence of which side he might be on. He's claiming to reveal God's presence. So is he in line with his Jewish heritage, or is he idolatrous and heretical like the emperor? As the story's tensions continue to multiply, this brings the question of blasphemy against Jesus, of claiming too much godliness for himself, an abomination which would mean he should be expelled and stoned, put to death in order to protect the other believers, even though he's claiming he does protect them.

Partly, then, I raise this to remind us faith is serious business. If we disregard it or try to equalize all distinctions, we dishonor those who have been willing to sacrifice their lives, and also dishonor and disrespect God, failing to hold God as what we fear, love, and trust above all else. We might ask, where is our commitment and

* from *The Iona Abbey Worship Book*

We believe that God is present
in the darkness before dawn;
in the waiting and uncertainty
where fear and courage join hands,
conflict and caring link arms,
and the sun rises over barbed wire.

We believe in a "with-us" God
who sits down in our midst to share our humanity.

We affirm a faith
that takes us beyond a safe place:
into action, into vulnerability, and onto the streets.

We commit ourselves to work for change and put ourselves on the line; to
bear responsibility, take risks, live powerfully, and face humiliation;
to stand with those on the edge; to choose life
and be used by the Spirit for God's new community of hope. Amen

devotion? How is this so important for us that we'd give up our life?

But also, oddly, it invites us to live in the ambivalence. We have this peculiar faith that identifies God with a human being; the almighty with a lowly peasant; the holy and righteous one of justice who might be a lawbreaker, a dangerous criminal; the everliving and eternal one as crucified, dead, and buried; the infinite as dwelling in a particular time and place. Again, how is it that I AM, the God of the temple, the God inherently identified with Jewish history and people and practice, is somehow claimed by us here?

When Jesus says "I AM the gate. I AM the good shepherd," it's accentuated. He specifically says that he won't qualify insiders, as if he's ruling out both orthodoxy and orthopraxy in saying that he has other sheep who aren't part of this flock. As gate, he seems willing to let in anybody, as long as it's for the sake of sustaining life.

We have to hold some skepticism and ambivalence for faith and the promise of life that must be taken on trust, that remains unseen and not exactly verifiable. There's something about this practice that is supposed to offend. It's not just to afflict the comfortable, but that we come to church in order to have our routines disrupted, our preconceived notions interrupted, our prejudices redefined, our faults clearly seen but also to enliven our better selves, to have our sense of God reoriented. We're guided, corralled, shepherded (we may say) through the dark valleys. Which leads us to a place where we find ourselves at a table with our enemies, and the hard practice of love.

So we remain skeptical and on the edge of offense for an abominable faith that welcomes those outsiders, that is willing to ignore rules and propriety and best practices, that even extends constant forgiveness to those who so clearly don't deserve it—the abusers and offenders and takers of life, a faith that pursues as worthy to reclaim the lost and forsaken, and insists on the dignity of those we'd been told to write off, a faith that

offers grace and blessing and resources for life to those who have done so little to earn them, that doesn't claim inherent goodness for the happy and healthy and wholesome and doesn't reward the successful, but demands you help the outcast and the poor and the hungry, and give them also a spot to share the refreshing waters. Heck, this is a club that's even willing to have You as a member. Do you really want to be part of such a despicable organization? Do you really want to be associated with a God like this?

A postscript: So the thing about this sermon is that I believe all that was faithful and vital as God's word for you. But I finished working on it and have been feeling a need for a second entirely different sermon and word from God. Here it is: if you are feeling lost and confused, struggling in life, very truly Jesus tells you nothing will snatch you from his grasp, ever. You're held in his arms.

Amen and amen.

Hymn: *Gather Us In* (ELW 532)