

4 Easter – Year A – May 15, 2011
Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10
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Being ever conscious of our limited budgets, most of us have little choice but to buy our groceries where we can find the best deals including loyalty card specials, and exclusive offers. Several weeks ago, Wal-Mart started matching the exclusives and special offers of local supermarkets like Safeway, Eddie's Market, and Basha's. Even the most ingenuous shopper can see that Wal-Mart's strategy of price matching will turn a decent profit for them, because of all the other items in our shopping basket at regular prices, as well as our impulse buys. If stealing customers away with price matching didn't work, then Wal-Mart wouldn't be doing it. Suffice it to say there's a reason why the Walton family is wildly and excessively wealthy. On a daily basis, you and I receive persuasive, too good to miss opportunities to purchase this or that product that are practically guaranteed to enhance our quality of life, bring us happiness, or at least make us the envy of friends and neighbors. Often those invitations are computer-generated and highly personalized. Sometimes even our good deeds seem to backfire on us. We donate to a charity, who immediately sells our name and address to some kind of clearing house, and within a month, we're literally inundated with requests for money. Now I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure this is not what Jesus meant by living an abundant life! Sadly, our cynicism grows, and our trust in all types of organizations is eroded a little bite at a time, especially when products don't live up to the huge build up, when our name is sold, our government-issued identity stolen, or whenever we're duped, or cheated of dignity and respect. Even the church has suffered because of trusts betrayed, abuse of power, poor stewardship, theft, and unethical behavior.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus sharply criticizes the religious leaders of His own day naming them as thieves and bandits. They are the ones who climb into the sheepfold over the walls or fences, meant to keep out dangerous predators, and those who remorselessly and mercilessly exploit others. These days, gated communities are quite common, and are marketed as being safer, especially for seniors. Given that many crimes happen at night and are opportunistic in nature, it's sensible to restrict access to vulnerable communities after dark. For the famous and fabulously wealthy, living behind high fences with electronic gates also offers some privacy and protection from the curious and anyone else they don't want to see. Perhaps equally importantly, the gates and other security measures also protect their earthly treasurers. In Jesus' day as it is now, anyone who doesn't come in through the main gate is obviously not welcome or up to no good.

Jesus describes Himself as the shepherd of the sheep. He is the Good Shepherd who leads the sheep through the gate into safety each night and into rich pastures each day. His sheep hear and know His voice, and so they follow Him. With so many competing voices, compelling and persuasive offerings, how do we know who to listen to any more? How can we discern whether this religious leader or that faith community is part of the Good Shepherd's flock? What are the signs that we're being carefully groomed for fleecing, being dazzled by a charismatic leader, or being led to slaughter by an unscrupulous hireling? Hirelings, who really don't care for anyone else but themselves are always exposed for what and who they are, unfortunately that revelation often comes at great cost to their followers. We've probably all encountered a hireling or two at some time in our lives. They're as smooth as silk in speech and manner, even as they cunningly manipulate, and unhesitatingly cajole, con, steal or hurt us for their own gain. They're the proverbial wolves in sheep's clothing. On the other hand, a discerning community is prayerful, comes together to worship God, and actively engages the Word of God by reading and studying the Scriptures, in book studies, and through their faith in action. It's a community where there is evidence of spiritual growth and transformation, manifested in generous hospitality, respectful and deepening relationships, as well as in the sharing of all God's good gifts with others, both inside and outside the gate. In short, it's a healthy,

vibrant community like this one that follows Jesus' command to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, takes our Baptismal vows seriously, and practices God's graciousness.

Jesus also describes Himself as the gate of salvation. "Whoever enters by me will be saved," he says. Then, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." As followers of Jesus, continuing His mission in the world, we share the exclusive claims of our faith, including forgiveness for our sins, salvation, resurrection life now, and unending life in Christ. By faith in Christ Jesus, by losing ourselves in Him, we not only gain life, but we are blessed with abundant life. God sends Jesus, His only son, for the life of the world. Jesus willingly lays down His life, so that all who believe in Him may be reconciled to God. Our relationship with Jesus is one of complete intimacy, and one in which we can confidently, and joyfully place our trust. Jesus' love for us has no limits in time or space. Jesus is with us wherever we go, in and through whatever situation we're facing. He will never abandon us, and is always working for our greatest good.

In the story, Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and the gate, but there is also a gatekeeper, who opens the gate for Jesus to lead the sheep in and out, and so that His voice may be heard. Those who opposed Jesus in His lifetime were also gatekeepers of a sort. They sought gain for themselves by impoverishing their flock. They tried to discredit Jesus, keep Him as an outsider, and silence His voice. You and I are also gatekeepers, not like the self-serving religious leaders of Jesus' day, or our own day, but as God's beloved children. As followers of Christ, our gate-keeping mission is two-fold: to open the gate wide enough to welcome Christ in all persons, just as we promise in our Baptismal covenant. Equally, we must be discerning enough to protect and shelter the most vulnerable amongst us from the wolves of society. As part of our mission, we help others to follow the Lord by inviting them to join us, walking alongside them, pointing to Christ and helping them to hear His voice in community. In fact abundant life looks just like Jesus' life, and the lives each of His faithful disciples. Living abundantly, we actively seek out and delight in our relationship with God in Christ Jesus, and with others. Living abundantly, we participate in a life-giving faith community here at Our Saviour. We share God's abundance purposefully and generously through our vocations and ministries, serving the common good, and building up the Body of Christ. Abundant life is also free from fear, because we live in Christ's love, as well as the confident knowledge and hope of our salvation. Whatever happens in this life, our hope and trust is in the Lord.

As modern-day gatekeepers, the whole church is called to imitate Christ's life of simplicity and sacrifice. We offer ourselves to God's service with humble hearts, as selflessly as we can, and stand as Jesus does, in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. The one thing we can be certain of is that abundant life in Christ doesn't look like anything we can buy at Wal-Mart, JCPenney, or Amazon.com. That's just stuff, some of it useful, some of it not, but just the stuff of earthly life, ultimately unimportant and perishable. The greatest treasures of abundant life are not available in the stores. For example, no one can steal our love, or our faith in God. No one can rob us of the hope of the resurrection. We lose nothing, yet gain everything, when we share God's love in Christ Jesus, our Lord. As David, the shepherd king, once sang in what we now call Psalm 24, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; ... Who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false.... They will receive blessing from the Lord,... the God of their salvation. Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in" (Psalm 24: 1, 3-5, 7).

Amen.