

# **“Ladies—Go Through That Gate”**

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Providence United Methodist Church

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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The gospel lesson for today is taken from the book of John, chapter 10, verses 1 through 10. “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.

They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. This is God’s word for God’s people. Thanks be to God. Lord bless our hearing today. Give us understanding from the reading. Help us be attentive and allow you to work in us as you teach us. Let it produce much fruit. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

We honor all women on Mother’s Day. There are many different kinds of mothers—as we read in the litany a few moments ago. Some women haven’t borne their own children. Some have. Some women have become mothers to those who

need a part-time mom. Some adopt. Some become foster moms. There are many different scenarios about women and how they nurture children.

It would be wrong to not mention the men who have raised their children. However I believe there's one thing that flows down through history and into all cultures. Most men and women love children. It just runs through our blood. Are there men who could raise children better than a woman? Most assuredly there are. Do men have a maternal instinct or an aptitude to raise children? Most certainly they do.

But there's something different about women. Bearing children is something we want to do. We're made that way. We're equipped for it. We have the physical build for it and the resources to get the job done. The baby grows inside of us. We carry it around. It's like we're yoked to each other. We carry the little one in us and talk to her. We develop a relationship long before we see their face. When they're inside of us we pray for every little finger and toe. We're intimate with them in a way men just can't be—the baby is part of our body.

Jesus came to earth as a man. Why? Maybe it's because people living in the culture of that day would never have accepted a woman as God. Well I guess they didn't accept Jesus as a man either. . . . . Fact is this; God is neither woman nor man, but God is spirit. God is the Creator of all who is all things to all people—God is not flesh and blood or male or female. God is God.

So what about God and women? Does God really understand a woman if God is Father? Ever know a man who understood a woman? ? ? Well, I guess that's the point. God isn't a man. So why is God called Father in the Bible? One reason might be because in the first century the world was a male-dominated patriarchal culture. In many countries today it's not any different, and even in America we're not really where we need to be in regard to equality.

The 2012 *Book of Resolutions of the U.M.C.* states this. “Jesus treated women with dignity and respect, challenged the conventional sexism of his day, and forever redefined the role of women in the church and society.” For many years Methodism has been very attentive to the importance of language inclusivity. I believe it promotes the ease of a smoother and more accurate way of conversing. My learning in seminary was pretty dogmatic when it came to using inclusive language. Students were called out for it regularly.

In our humanness, we ascribe anthropological attributes to God to define God, but God is not human. If we were to say anything, we might say God is both masculine and feminine at the same time. In our English vernacular we search for a pronoun to describe God, but it doesn’t fit. God is different and so much more than he or she. No doubt you’ve heard the masculine references to God, but allow me to present a few of the feminine ones. These references speak of the reality of God who is a Mother. *God speaks* in Isaiah 49 and says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, *yet I will not forget you.*”

Listen to the metaphors used to describe God and highlight the motherly feminine metaphors that are used. God is pictured as a mother bird sheltering her children under her wings in Ruth 2. Listen. “May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.” And in Deuteronomy 32 God is seen as an eagle that “. . . stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, *that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.*”

But don’t forget how we tend to create stereotypes of motherly warmth and care with some of these images of God. In Hosea 13 God says “Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open” says the Lord. In Isaiah 66 God

says, “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.”

Now I’d like to focus just a few moments on verses 7 and 9 from the passage that was read. Listen to the verses again. “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” Our aim as mothers, grandmothers, and women and men is to do our best to show children the love of God. Jesus comes to give. He gives life, and he builds up. The life God gives is an overflowing and abundant life. In the metaphor passage we read, we are the sheep, and Jesus is the gate. He says it twice.

The sheep had a kind of “communal sheepfold.” Each town would care for their sheep in this common place. The shepherds would return their flocks each night from grazing. The enclosure for the sheep was protected by a strong door that could be opened only by the chief shepherd’s key. This was one kind of containment to protect sheep at night.

Another kind was in the fields. These were temporary and makeshift containments. It consisted of a circle of rocks with an opening at one end. The shepherd himself would serve as the gate, and he would lie across its entrance to sleep at night. If someone or something tried to hurt the sheep they’d have to walk over the shepherd. The shepherd himself was the door.

Mothers and grandmothers, husbands and grandfathers, do your best to be that gate each day as you care for your children. Be that gate that protects and watches. Don’t allow them to wander off and go astray. Take the time for each of your children when you think the time isn’t there. Steal the time. Take it. Care for every little hurt as the Good Shepherd does. And when they come in at night, let

them pass under your watchful eye. Be vigilant to catch any kind of injury or emotional challenge that may have captured them.

Be that gate for your children when they need comfort, love, and rest so they feel the Good Shepherd's peace. Honorably know that God has chosen you to care for these children and that you have them on loan until Christ calls them home. As your children come in and out of that gate let them feel the security and nurture that comes from you. Provide that spiritual and physical nourishment so they grow into the child of God they were destined to become. Call down abundant life into their lives as you petition God for all they need. Stop at nothing. Make sure they know how much you care. Even to the very end. We never stop being parents.

Listen to their needs as the Good Shepherd is cognizant of his sheep's. Lead them and call them to follow you. And know that just like the Good Shepherd, you're never off-duty. When our children are in the hands of a God like this . . . . . there is no fear, and peace blesses our home. Be that peace for your children. Keep traveling through that gate ladies. Never give up. Be that godly example, and seek God's presence every day. And for those whose children are grown up or if you've never had children, extend grace and more grace to families who are raising their children and understand; it's absolutely the most difficult and demanding job there is under the sun. Always extend grace, and be understanding of their call.

Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you for adopting us into your family through the miracle of your grace. We are truly brothers and sisters to each other. Today, loving God, we pray for our mothers who cared for us when we were helpless, who comforted us when we were hurt, whose love and care we often took for granted. We pray for those who are grieving the loss of their mother, those who never knew their biological mother, and now yearn for her. We pray for those who have experienced the wonder of an adopted mother's love, the families separated

by war or conflict. Lord, give them special blessings. Keep us united with you and with each other, so that we can be and become all that we are meant to be. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.