

*Two Women's Tales*

Shepherd's Grace Church

May 11, 2014

“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.<sup>2</sup>The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.<sup>3</sup>The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.<sup>4</sup>When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice.<sup>5</sup>They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”<sup>6</sup>Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.<sup>7</sup>So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.<sup>8</sup>All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them.<sup>9</sup>I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.<sup>10</sup>The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (John 10: 1-10) (also read Acts 2: 42-47)

Mother's Day evokes so many memories for most of us! When I say the word “mother” what is the very first thought that comes into your mind? Do you remember the person who came into your room to dress you when you were very young? Do you remember the person who hid that special sweet tasting surprise in the bottom of your oatmeal bowl at breakfast so you would eat the oatmeal to get to it? Do you remember the person who always made sure you got where you were going...even when you forgot to tell her until 10 minutes before you needed to be there? Do you remember the woman who slipped her arm into the arm of your father as tears streamed down his face at the loss of his own mother? Do you remember the woman who spoiled your children to the point that they would really rather spend their Friday nights with her than with you because they knew they could get whatever they wanted? Do you remember the woman who made sure you got to church on Sunday morning...to youth group on Sunday evening...to confirmation classes...to the conversations with your pastor as you prepared for your wedding...and who taught you for the first time or for the last time about God who created, redeems, and sustains us through the power of God's Holy Spirit and by the gift of redemption given through God's Son Jesus Christ!

Today's passage from Acts tells us how the faithful devoted themselves to sharing, serving, securing and teaching others about the “Good News of Jesus” both by word and by example. Many of our memories of mother are of her in this capacity. Moms, for the most part are faithful and devoted and their loyalty is unwavering. The Apostle Paul speaks of these women at the end of his letter to the Corinthians, encouraging the people of Corinth to listen to these women, to believe their words and to respond to them out of faith! Both Paul and Luke, the author of Acts affirm the incredible influence of women, mothers in particular on the spread of the gospel. They recognize what we all should know! Our moms are the believers who have been added to the faith, but even more, our moms are the ones who work faithfully as examples of the love of Jesus Christ in our lives.

She was a mother of one, now expecting her second child. This one was due in just three short months and she could still remember the pain of the first birth! She was terrified at the thought of this second birth, yet she lay there trembling at the news she had just received. The doctor told her that her body was trying to reject her second child. She was experiencing pre-mature labor and that for the next three months all she could do was rest in bed and reject the impulses she had to care for her first child. The doctor recommended that she check in to the hospital for the next several days to insure that she get the proper rest.

She had tried to lift the first child when she felt something pop in her lower abdomen. She knew in the moment that it wasn't right but she thought if she ignored the pain it would go away. That night she went to bed early and said nothing to her husband. When she awoke the next morning the pain was even more intense! She was having difficulty moving and when she tried to stand the pressure made it difficult for her to breathe with out intense pain. She winced when she got out of bed and her husband stopped what he was doing. Startled, he came to her side and asked what was wrong.

She described the pain and he did not hesitate. He took her at once to the emergency room where the doctors began to ask questions and try to make determinations. The year was 1956 and there were no technological advances such as ultra sound and MRI. The doctors had to touch and prod and poke and cause pain where she was already feeling intense pain. Through it all she became more and more terrified as she asked about the condition of her baby!

During the examination she became worried about her other child. She started to cry as she wondered who was caring for her young son whom she had left alone. She was so confused about what was happening to her that she couldn't form the questions for the doctors. She became disorientated and generally incoherent. She started to sob and to scream! The doctors brought her husband in to console her but she had difficulty even recognizing him! She continued to struggle and the doctors could see that she was placing not only herself but also her baby in danger!

In the 1950's the doctors did not know that the anesthetics they gave pregnant women also affected their children. They gave the woman a strong sedative and she slept. When she woke she was calm but still confused. The doctor was sitting beside her and her husband was nowhere to be seen! Startled she asked for him but the doctor assured her he had gone to see about the young child. Calmed, she lay back down and slept.

She awoke several hours later. The doctor was still by her side but a crib had been moved into the emergency room and her young son was laying quietly sleeping. Her husband was holding her hand and she became aware of the pressure of it as she grew more fully awake. The doctor began to speak to her, softly, slowly saying that she was trying to reject the pregnancy. She had two choices. She could continue to live the life she was currently living or she could spend the next three months in bed protecting the unborn child she was carrying.

If she chose the first option, it was likely that the unborn would die and naturally abort. The symptoms of rejection were far along and normal activity of pregnancy seemed unlikely. If she choose the second one, she would have to be confined to complete bed rest. She would not be able to care for her infant

son or go about the normal day to day activities of her life. Someone would have to come in and care for her. Someone else would have to come in and care for her infant child.

After the doctor had made her options completely known, she asked him to leave. She then turned to her husband and saw the look of concern on his face. As she started to speak, he quieted her. For the first time, she noticed the lines of tears that had been running down his face. Before she could speak he pressed his fingers to her lips. He then told her what the doctors had not. With either option, there was significant risk. If she choose to continue the pregnancy, there was the possibility that poisons could build up in her body that might be toxic to her life. She could become very sick and perhaps even die. On the other hand, termination of the pregnancy at her advanced state posed problems of its own in the 1950's. Neither option was risk free for her and her own health.

The two looked at each other for a long time and they said nothing. Finally she squeezed his hand and they nodded in unison. They had made their choice! One option ended one life for sure. The other option offered the possibility for both lives to continue and they chose the possibility of life! Together they worked out the details! They decided to ask her mother to come and look after the young infant. They talked to each other about how difficult that would be and the kind of problems it would cause for each of them. They agreed it was the only option that made sense. The child knew his grandmother and would be glad to have her familiar face. The talked to the doctors and discovered that they were recommending the infant child spend no more than 1 hour per day in the mother's presence and were shocked at that but they had made their decision!

Together, they made plans for her care. He could be there at night but was already working two jobs as he tried to get his own business going. During the day, his mother could come out. She lived right there in town. The rejected that idea. His mother and hers did not get along. The young wife and mother did not need the conflict and disagreement as an added stress. They talked about having her sister come. She was 10 years older and certainly capable but he didn't get along well with her. Finally they decided to put that part on hold for awhile and made the expensive long distance call to her mom. (There were no cell phones in the '50's and long distance was costly. The young couple only made occasional calls to her family which lived more than 200 miles away.) Her mother answered immediately and he told her what had happened. She quickly agreed to come and said she would be on the next train.

At the end of the call her mother said, "of course you are going to call your mother to care for her." He stammered and she quickly butted in, "don't worry about the two of us. This is more important than any little thing that we might disagree about! Call her!" Relieved and frustrated at the same time, he hung up the phone. "Your mom says we should call mine," he smiled and said. She nodded agreement and the decision was made.

The doctors came back into the room and the young couple advised them of their decision and their plans. The doctors nodded agreement and gave them the detailed instructions once again before preparing her discharge papers. The couple prepared to return home; home to a place where only several hours ago they were alone and living a life of young newly weds with a young child. Now they returned to a place that seemed way to small for the army of grandmothers that was about to invade.

He got her to bed and began to follow the instructions she had given while they made plans. He set up places for both women to sleep, for the baby to be made comfortable and finally for him. Then he went to pick up his mother and bring her back to the small house they were living in. He walked her through the doctors list of instructions, asked if she had any questions, then took the child to meet his other grandmother at the train station.

For the next three months, the couple lived a life that seemed surreal to them. Their house was invaded, their meals interrupted, their routines rejected and their health challenged. They lived a life of struggle so their unborn child could survive! The two grandmothers kept their promises and their distance from one another but they worked together for the good of the lives that were at stake. Finally, their efforts were rewarded! The child was born. He was healthy and happy and able to go home in the normal course of time. While the mother was in the hospital, the father had moved the house back to normal and made plans for the grandmothers to leave!

Over the next few weeks, the lives of the young couple returned to the normal of having two young children 14 months apart. They struggled financially for awhile, they struggled physically for awhile, but after awhile they found their way and the young infant whose life was in such peril grew to lead a perfectly normal life. The young couple raised him as they did all their children to come to faith in God, to trust that God in his life and to serve not only God but others! The young couple who cried out to God for miracles experienced the miracle of life in abundance! They experienced abundance because they chose to allow for the possibility of abundance!

In the 1990's a woman is working as secretary to her husband. For 50 years they have struggled to make their business work in the same town with the same clientele and through the same kinds of community involvement. They have raised four children in the community. They have involved themselves in church groups and have taken leadership roles in various organizations. She has been president of the local PTA. He is a past state president of one of the community's civic organizations.

Their business has sustained the growth of their family and together they have prospered to the point where life seems easier. All the kids are through school. All have well paying jobs and families of their own. They are grandparents and looking forward to one day becoming great-grandparents. Their lives seem settled and somewhat secure!

The phone rings on a Friday. The mother, the secretary answers. Slowly she sits back into her chair and her whole body seems to go limp! Her voice stutters and stammers and then there is silence. She lets her mind flash back to the life she has lived. She remembers the four children she has raised. The oldest one is an Eagle Scout, a tribute to his father and the years of involvement and leadership he exhibited. The youngest, her only daughter is now married and raising one child of her own. All the kids had been with her When she gave birth to her first, a daughter, one of three grandchildren.

The youngest son had taken awhile to find himself. He lived at home for awhile and while he was living at home, he worked around the house, did chores and paid for several home improvements that they wanted done. He was starting to work in the computer industry now. She didn't really understand the language but he was passionate about his work. He loved the cutting edge technology and was always

bringing home new gadgets that did stuff she did not really care about but it seemed to make him happy. Only recently, he moved to Topeka to work with his brother. He was going to be in charge of technical support for his brother's office. She was happy they would be working together. Despite the age difference they made a good team.

The second son had always been focused. He had challenged everything when he was younger. Church was a particular sticking point. She had always made sure he got to church and to Sunday School. He went, but grudgingly. It was continually reported back to her that he argued with Sunday School teachers and others in class about even the existence of God. She believed he was just trying to find himself and that eventually he would come to faith as a logical consequence of his investigation.

After he passed the bar exam, he went into practice in Topeka with an eye on politics. He ran for United States congress but was too underfunded and probably too young to make a serious challenge. She knew he wanted to try again though, someday. Someday though, seemed to be far away recently. He went through a bitter divorce and the break-up left him shaken and somewhat insecure. She had never seen him insecure and it tested her faith.

She persuaded her husband to let him be legal counsel to their business. It turned out he had a knack for understanding the business and the future of it. He soon became involved in professional organizations around the business and was selected to be counsel for the state wide professional organization. His reputation spread as a learned and wise counsel for that organization and he was asked to become professional counsel for other states organizations as well. On the day the phone call came in, he was returning from Washington D.C. where he had been asked to represent the professional organizations at the White House.

As the phone clumsily found its way back to the cradle all these thoughts and millions more flashed before her eyes. She slumped into the chair and after stammering and stuttering she started sobbing uncontrollably. She screamed out in a loud voice and immediately her husband was at her side. For minutes all she could say was he's gone! He's GONE!

Finally she was able to get control of herself and say to her husband that their second child had been killed. He was gone! Both started to weep together, holding each other trying to be a comfort to each other. Slowly they gathered themselves and in shock they began to call the family, notifying each of his passing. AS they talked to each, most did not know what to say. One however, knowing the difficulty this son had with reconciling faith and reason asked if he knew the Lord.

With great difficulty, the mother remembered and recounted the events of his birth. She remembered how she had laid on a bed for three months so he could have a chance to live. She remembered the sacrifice of her husband and of the two mothers who put aside their petty differences so the possibility of life might be available to this helpless unborn infant! As these *Two Women's Tales* merged together she could know with confidence that her second son's life was a miracle made possible only by the grace of God and the incredible offer God makes to each one of us to choose life!

Did her son know the Lord? Was he going to spend eternity in the presence of Jesus? In the end, none of us can know that answer for another person. That mother cannot know for sure how her son choose. All she can know for certain is that she led him to the possibility. She provided the opportunity and she shared her faith. She let him know the story of his birth and the options that had been available. She communicated the importance of life and she openly taught from her heart just how important his life was and that she believed based on faith that God had given that life to her for a time. She let him know that she was and would be forever grateful!

This morning as we celebrate Mother's Day, we have already figured out that these *Two Women's Tales* are really the tale of one mother. In a way they are the tale of every mother. All moms know the struggle of childbirth and the many choices that enter into the care and well being they desire for their child. They struggle with economic, social, political religious and personal issues regarding the birth of a child and they know they have options. Each of those choices involve life and the way that life is to be lived. Mothers are incredible not because they have the choices but because they struggle so mightily with those choices weighing each one carefully, recognizing the implications involved in all. They recognize the responsibilities they have for leading their children through the world and to a place where the children have their own choices, their own decisions to make.

In this morning's passage from John we want to jump quickly to the shepherd. We all know that Jesus is the "good shepherd" and that it is he who guides us into the Father's presence and eternal life, but this Sunday morning, this Mother's Day morning, Jesus himself has a different message for us. First he tells us there will be many who will try to influence the sheep in this world. Sheep are easily influenced and will be open to those who try to enter into their lives by a back door or an open window. These unwelcomed influences; the influences of wealth and possession and worldly prosperity are thieves and bandits stealing the promise of fullness, the promise of life from the sheep. Those distractions will cause the sheep to run away from that which is right!

The real shepherd, the one who will lead the sheep down the right path to promise and possibility is the one willing to be involved in the life of the sheep from the very beginning. The real shepherd is the one who speaks to the sheep in soothing tones letting the sheep know that all will be well and every kind of thing will be well. The real shepherd is the one who sets the sheep on the right path and reminds them of choices and consequences. Most of us want to say at this point, "isn't that Jesus?" Jesus, himself however gives us the answer this morning.

He says the sheep know the voice of the shepherd, they come out at the sound of that voice and they follow the one who goes on ahead of them. They do not follow the thieves and the bandits. They run from those promises of ease and wealth because they do not know those promises. They have been taught that there is no easy way down the path of life so they do not follow. We are still thinking at this point, "That sounds a lot like Jesus!" Then Jesus tells us, "I am the Gate."

Jesus is not the one who leads the sheep. He is the gate through which all the sheep must enter. Through Him, everyone who seeks the abundant promise of God must enter! So, if Jesus is the gate, who is the shepherd? Who is the one who knows the sheep? Who is the one who is known by the

sheep and the gatekeeper? The shepherd is the family! The shepherd is the part of the family which gives guidance and direction to the lives of all its members. The shepherd is the one in the family who provides comfort and care to all family members. From time to time, each member of a family or community or church fulfills this role for others but the one who most consistently fulfills this role for so many is the mother!

Mom calls and you listen! How many of us can remember being outside playing even two or three blocks away when the call comes from our own back door. "Dinner's Ready!" We hear that voice and we know it immediately! We recognize it and we come out of what ever we are doing. If we do not, we know there will be consequences! We follow that voice and we are led in to pasture. That same voice gets us up on Sunday morning for church and talks to us about the grace of God and leads us to know there is more to life than material wealth and prosperity. That same voice lets us know that material wealth is ok but that it is to be used not for our own selfish gain but for the glory of God!

Jesus is the gate! Mom is the shepherd. She leads us through her love to the gate. She lets us know what our choices are and what options we have. She reminds us of her faith and the choices she has had to make and the consequences of those choices and she brings us to the thresh hold! Mom, however, cannot open the gate.

The gatekeeper opens the gate. The one who sent the gate opens it and lets those in who choose to come in through Him! The gatekeeper is God who knows our hearts and our willingness to enter through the gate into the pasture God provides. God's pasture is not limited to the wealth of the world. It is not limited at all. It anticipates the needs of each of us and provides for those needs not in scarcity but in abundance.

The shepherd knows this. That is why the shepherd is so persistent in leading us to the gate. The shepherd wants us to know the abundance of life, the abundance of possibility in God's pasture! The shepherd wants us to recognize the choices that are available and the shepherd wants us to choose life! Life does not mean that everything will be easy and that there will be Ice Cream after every meal. Life means that we will experience all the joy, all the pain, all the sadness and all the excitement that exists for us every day! Life means living and living to the fullest. Life is the promise made by the gate this morning.

Life is the choice the mother made years ago when she rested so that her son might be born. Life is the answer to the question that was asked of her, "does he know the Lord?" Life is the gift given by God and it is given in abundance. The shepherd knows this and keeps leading us to the gate so that we can come in and go out and find pasture, the pasture that will feed and sustain us forever! That is the mother's wish for all of us! That is the gift Jesus gives to us! That is the abundance that exists for us if we enter into life in Jesus' name! Amen!