

John’s Gospel lesson today is a puzzling one when you try to enter into the story or read it through a lens of our present world. This particular series of Jesus’ teachings and statements may leave you wondering who the characters are. The context of this reading is Jesus’ interpreting the healing of man born blind. The Pharisees and the disciples were questioning Jesus about who sinned—this man or his parents that he was born blind? You know that story. The Pharisees question the man, the parents; they go back to the man for a second time. Jesus was in conversation with the Pharisees about whether they are blind and then begins our passage.

Jesus presents to them and to us “this figure of speech.” (John 10:6). The figure of speech is about a gate, a sheepfold, a shepherd, sheep, and a gatekeeper. Jesus is offering this as a way of their “seeing” a little more clearly. Sometimes in Jesus’ teaching we can get caught up in trying to figure out who all of the players are and what the meaning might be. Some scholars will say the essence of the story is in the last sentence—“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

We said Psalm 23—a psalm so familiar to many of us and one that was used in Christine Faunce’s funeral this week. The psalm also brings into play the imagery of the shepherd, and we as Christians want to impose Jesus as the

shepherd into that Psalm vs. David's shepherd in the Hebrew Scriptures. We always invited to use our reasoning to make sense of what we hear and what we see. We do that together in community—in small communities like the Bible study groups or in our gathered community at worship.

The notion of “beloved community” has come across my path in several ways recently, and I am touched by that notion. One of our *Heads Up! Hartford* pastors used it to describe our group of young people and adults that gather for camp. It was used in the context of our trying to understand some challenging aspects of this year's camp.

A paper was issued this week from a General Convention committee on the Episcopal Church's long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice. The paper is entitled “Becoming the Beloved Community.” On the front of the paper is an image of a labyrinth with words in four quadrants: “telling the truth, proclaiming the dream, practicing the way, repairing the breach.” I am still reading the paper that weaves into our baptismal covenant ways of becoming a beloved community through a lens that honors all people. This paper was a direct connection to the conversation last Monday night where the Canton High School community is trying to move toward restoration.

Last Thursday I attended the Episcopal Church Women's annual meeting along with many of the Thursday morning Bible Study group. The keynote speaker was a young woman priest from Atlanta that I had heard preach at General Convention in 2015. Her name is Kimberly Jackson, Associate Rector of All Saints, Atlanta.

Kimberly also spoke of the notion of the beloved community and used an interesting image of a puzzle. She had been at a leadership conference and participated in an exercise where each participant was given a piece of a puzzle. They were instructed to turn the puzzle piece over and to put the puzzle together without looking at the picture. It was a smart group, and they used all of their pieces and quickly realized that some pieces were missing. They eventually discovered that an observer who was sitting off to the side of the room had a missing piece. The leader of the conference had a missing piece. The whole point of the exercise was to poignantly show how each person in the beloved community has a piece of the puzzle. Each person has worth, no matter where they are on the margins. The border pieces count just as much as the central pieces. All people in the beloved community are needed, no matter where they sit or stand or who they are.

Jesus was with a beloved community and taught them in what seems like confusing ways. It's as if he offered pieces to the grand puzzle of life. The

often didn't get the meaning. We often don't get the full meaning, and we're invited to use our minds and hearts as we open ourselves up. For me the beloved community is one that learns together, struggles together, rejoices together, weeps together. We're on the journey together trying to get it—trying to pay attention to who's in and who's not. The shepherd indeed guides us these many years later and protects reminds us over and over. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10).

We take that life and abundance and live as the beloved community in this place and we're invited to see that work about us in the world. We're also invited to take that notion of beloved community out with us. We are each puzzle pieces of the beloved community as are all the people we encounter and welcome. That's good news!