The Nicaraguan Lutheran Church of Faith and Hope has about 40 communities – about 30 of which rural communities. During my time in Nicaragua, I was encouraged to visit the communities on a regular basis…in the community of San Luis, there was a woman there who was participated in the agriculture co-op that the church helped to start in their community. She lived alongside the main path to get into the community which was located about 30 min outside of town on the otherside of a hanging bridge that was wide enough for a motorcycle to cross – or a 30 meter wide river to cross depending on the time of the year. This woman owned chickens and roosters. On one of my visits to San Luis, we stopped in to say hello and the local engineer who I was with said to me: Mike, ask her to call her chickens….I was like what? Why? He said: “Come on, just do it!” So after a bit of small talk – I asked her to call her chickens and she goes: \{imitation of her call\} and about 60 chickens and roosters come flapping towards us. The engineer just looked over at me and laughed.

While not chickens – we are told this week that we are sheep…we are sheeple. We are to listen to the voice of the gatekeeper for we know the voice of the gatekeeper and follow the gatekeeper. This section of reading is part of a larger section of reading – one in which we read or hear of Jesus being both the gatekeeper and the shepherd. As Dr. Elisabeth Johnson, an ELCA missionary in Cameroon writes: “The gate and the shepherd work together for the well-being of the sheep, so that the flock thrives. Jesus is both the gate and the shepherd at the same time; he guards and protects his sheep from danger, and he provides for their nourishment, for their life in abundance.”

Being a sheep means being protected, means being guarded, means being nourished, and cared for, so that we can thrive. So that we can live abundantly. It all seems very easy – our identity is in Jesus and all is taken care for…what do we have to do other than identify ourselves as sheep? The shepherd is before us, leads us in, takes us out, watches over us, leads us to green pastures. It feels very easy to be a sheep. Maybe if the sheep already feel like they are a part of the gated community of sheep. But there are sheep that feel outside of the gated pen.

This passage comes directly after the passage of Jesus healing the man who is born blind which we read during Lent this year. This man, who is given sight by Jesus, is questioned twice by the Pharisees, who don’t believe him and who cast the man out of their flock for his belief in Jesus. Jesus searches the man out….really Jesus?? You went all over just to find this one man who had been driven out? And Jesus asks him if he believes in the Son of Man…and the man says yes, just show him to me – and Jesus is like: I am right here….and invites him in. To believe in Jesus, in the abundant, all-inclusive life of Jesus was not easy…it is not easy. For the man born blind, and for many – society and religion has historically and continues to be exclusive. Yet Jesus is not an exclusive gatekeeper – he is not keeping anyone out except those who look to harm…to divide.

Believing in the abundant life that Jesus brings to all is not easy. Oftentimes we ourselves try and become gatekeepers and in the process harm and divide. What happens if we let the gatekeeping and shepherding to Jesus and instead focus on what abundant life looks like? We don’t have to travel far in the gospel of John. As I have stated a few times, abundance follows Jesus wherever he goes in the gospel of John. Whether that be an abundance of the grace upon grace that we all receive, an abundance of wine at Cana, an abundance of understanding and mercy for the Samaritan woman at the well, an abundance of healing with the boy who was dying in
Capernaum, an abundance of intimate, deep loving relationships with beloved disciples, an abundance of food with the feeding of the five thousand people, an abundance of power with the resurrection of Lazarus, an abundance of service with the washing of the disciples feet, or an abundance of compassion in the saving all of Creation.

To truly believe in this abundance does not mean being cooped up behind the gate – but listening to where Jesus – where the gatekeeper and good shepherd - is calling us….Jesus calls us out of the gated area and into the pastures. To share the abundance that comes with our identity with others. Even in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic – how are we being called by the good shepherd to share grace, to share understanding and mercy, to share good times with others, to share healing, to share food, to share the power, to serve, to share compassion.

From providing food donations to the Maine Township food pantry, to participating in the kinship connector program here at St. Luke’s where designated people are calling their way through the directory to connect with one another, abiding by the shelter-in-place orders which means that more people are staying healthy, to making masks for loved ones and senior living homes, to donating our stimulus checks if we are able, to organizations that continue to provide for the outcast, the excluded in our society. How can we continued to be called out of the gated area and into the pastures? Who and what are you connecting with during this time?

When the focus shifts to abundant life – the conversation turns away from who is in and who is out…abundant life is for all.

This week, we were scheduled to celebrate the Confirmation of our 8th graders. Youth that have been formed by their families, the St. Luke’s community and other faith communities, their social circles and sports teams. Their theatre and choirs. These 8th graders would be affirming their identity that Jesus is their gatekeeper, their shepherd. They would be affirming that they would listen to where and to whom Jesus is calling them to share in abundant life with other. We lament that this celebration is not happening today, but rejoice that we as a flock of sheeple will be there to celebrate together later in the summer. These youth have been the ones to invite others in, to speak about ways to include rather than exclude, to care for neighbor, for creation and for self, and already share how they see God moving in their lives. They recognize the voice of Jesus, their shepherd and the fields of abundant life. How can we be supportive of them in their journeys? How can be inclusive of their passions and gifts in our ministry at St. Luke’s?

When I think back to the woman calling her chickens – I would have never heard her call had it not been for the engineer, Noel, who told me to ask about it. This woman had been there the entire time with her animals – I had passed by her house plenty of times, but never knew about her call. How might in a similar way may help recognize the call of the good shepherd? God is already present – are we taking the time to see where life in abundance is and sharing that with others?