

Does this scenario sound at all familiar to you?

Little Johnny hits little Eddy...

**Mom sees what happens...grabs little Johnny's hand...smacks it!
and she says to him: "I've told you not to hit anyone!"**

I would bet that we have all seen that happen...maybe we have even done it,

I bet a lot of us have felt the urge to do it...

No matter. The question is... why in the world would we ever think that by hitting someone, we could teach them not to hit???

It sounds ridiculous!

So, my question for today, then is...how can we teach people to Love :

love God, love their neighbor and love themselves...which are some of the key teachings of Jesus...by threatening them with punishment and hell?

Our reading today has helped billions of people to feel 'saved' ...

**Their choice in following Jesus...entering through his gate has,
they believe, kept them out of hell and propelled them into heaven..
whew!**

**But it has also caused much harm to billions of people
who have been persecuted because they are not Christians...**

**Now I will grant you, this reading doesn't specifically speak of hell,
yet...it and many others in the Gospel of John**

has often been used to impose Christianity on others using the threat of hell.

**Some literalist Christians insist that Jesus was telling all generations
that the one and only gate into Heaven was through Christianity...
otherwise you were condemned for eternity to Hell...**

Why in the world would we think that by teaching people to be afraid of not following Jesus, to slap them on the hand, so to speak.. why would we think that it would help them to become more loving, more compassionate, more forgiving, which were the priorities of Jesus?

**Jesus always, always taught Love by being loving...
he taught forgiveness by forgiving,
he taught compassion by being compassionate.**

He never used fear to inspire love...because it doesn't work!

When John was writing his gospel, his community was under persecution and struggling to stay alive and to stay together.

Early followers of Jesus were scattered and diverse...

There was wide array of beliefs and practices in those fledgling communities...

**Early peoples were trying to find their way,
trying to figure out what was important and necessary.**

Did you have to become Jewish first?

Where is the proper place for worship? In the Temple? in the home?

What did you need to profess to believe?

Who was in? Who was out?

Many early Jewish followers of Jesus were being barred from entering the Temple because they weren't considered to be true Jews ...

Countless others were being persecuted by Rome....

It certainly wasn't an easy time to be a Christian...

And so John was trying to do what he could to sustain his community through all of the confusion and struggle.

**Scholars believe that the thieves and the bandits that Jesus refers to,
are the leaders of the Jewish people who did not accept Jesus as the Christ
...not leaders of other religions as we, nowadays, so often interpret it to mean.**

**John knew that Jesus knew he was talking to and about people
in his own religious tradition...
yet we, for centuries, have used it against people outside the Christian Tradition...**

**Jesus never intended to force people to join a particular tradition...
He was not into intimidating others...
he never expected anyone to join his movement just to make it into heaven...
yet that is exactly how the Gospel has often been used...**

**The key to understanding this passage and much of John's Gospel
is the last line in today's reading:**

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly"

**To give life, to offer life, to encourage and promote life
one must act, preach, teach, in a life giving way...**

**You can not promote life through and with the use of fear or condemnation...
Fear makes people cringe, put up barricades,
it makes people closed minded and often close hearted...**

**That was never the message or the method of Jesus.
Thieves and bandits take away from people not give to them,
they make them feel less than, not more than.
Thieves and robbers use force or violence or manipulation or deception
not or mercy or compassion or kindness or forgiveness...**

Anyone who uses manipulation, deception or fear...

**Anyone who uses physical, emotional or spiritual threats or violence
is not the true gate or the true shepherd...**

**no matter what their role or job description in the church happens to be,
no matter what church they belong to.**

The true gate is Love.

**The true gate, the true shepherd is the one who builds people up, who allows them freedom
to go in and to go out, who offers them rest and feeds them.**

So...what could be the message for today?

Be aware of your religious leaders...

be aware of whose theology you believe, whose advice you take to heart...

Do they make you feel less than or do they help you to feel whole?

Do they use fear? or do they use hope and joy?

Do they invite you to know life in abundance?

or do they diminish you and make you feel less than?

**Fear, violence, condemnation, threats and the people who use them,
are the thieves and bandits of life.**

**The true gate to abundant life is forgiveness, compassion,
joy, mercy, generosity and gratitude....**

**The true gate to abundant life are all those teachings of Jesus
that he lived and died for...**

**The true gate to abundant life is Love,
real, authentic Love.**

**Not some hand slapping, dominating, manipulating emotion masquerading as Love...
but real self-giving, life promoting Love.... where ever it may be found....**

And for this we most assuredly can say: Thank you, Amen