

Through the Gate

John 10:1-10

Home Moravian Church, November 16, 2025 (Anniversary/Chief Elder lovefeast)

The best words I ever saw on a T-shirt were, “I dress this way to annoy you.”

The shirt was worn by a young man, probably a teenager, sitting on the ground with some friends. As I recall, the group’s overall vibe was something Goth, maybe a lot of black, maybe some chains; but the only thing I remember clearly is that t-shirt. It made me laugh. It made me think: *You GOT me.*

Without the T-shirt, I might have rolled my eyes at the group on the ground. I might even have passed a little judgment. But that young man knew that his clothing would get my attention. That’s why he wore it! I doubt that he cared whether I was annoyed. But I think he cared that he was seen; and, being seen, he was heard.

To be seen and heard is what a young person needs, and it’s also what a young person deserves, however they choose to accomplish it, and however those choices may annoy us older folks. I walked away that day loving that young man, and thinking that his T-shirt could have been worn by any young person in any era—even in Salem in the eighteenth century.

From the minutes of the Salem Boards, January 17, 1787: “A circular letter was read, from the Unity Elders Conference to the Elders Conferences in the congregations, calling attention to the desire for fashionable clothes which is creeping into the Unity. It was also recommended that the Elders of each congregation take up the matter and determine whether their own congregation shows signs of folly in dress, this desire to follow fashions, and if any such is found it should be put away.”

Apparently, the desire was not put away, certainly not by the young, who were the primary offenders. Just a few weeks later, the Salem elders wrote: “It should be noted that the desire for fashionable dress is at bottom a wish to wear something different, something new, and so become noticeable and attract attention. Among such things are the big, shaggy hats; the hats with drooping brims, down which hang cords, or a pretty ribbon, or an unusual buckle....” The level of detail tells us that those trying to be noticeable were succeeding. The discussion goes on, and on, with particular attention to stockings, canes, waistcoats, buttons, boots. *And these are all men’s clothes.* The sisters barely get a mention, except for a few high heels on their shoes, or ribbons on their sleeves.

The Salem elders blamed the clothing rebellion on the American Revolution. Laugh if you like; but what else could have given young people the idea that they were free to make their own choices? And the choices didn’t stop with clothing. They wanted to choose the kind of work they would do, rather than have their work chosen for them. They even wanted to be able to choose a spouse, not by the suggestion of the elders or the drawing of the lot, but all on their own say.

Predictably, the elders reacted by doubling down on the rules. If the fence isn’t keeping the lambs in the pasture, tighten the fence. But tightening the fence too much can cause it to crack; and where there’s a crack, a little lamb might find a way out—which the lambs were sometimes even invited to do. The elders had written in 1785: “If anyone claims the above-mentioned ‘freedom’ against the rules of the town, he thereby proves that it would be better for him to live elsewhere.”

So distressed by the behavior of the young! So ready to show them the exit! Yet the Salem community *existed because of the young*. Christian David was 32 years old when he led a

group of religious refugees to the estate of Count Zinzendorf in Saxony. Zinzendorf was 22 when the arrival of those refugees inspired him to begin a radical experiment: the Christian community of Herrnhut, which would give birth to the Renewed Moravian Church. Anna Nitschmann was only 17 when she persuaded 13 other young single women in Herrnhut to make, not marriage, but devotion to Christ, their highest goal. So began the first Single Sisters' Choir, and the Moravian choir system.

For such young people to insist on such radical notions! How shocking! How *annoying*! But if they were annoying, well, they were also seen, and heard. And their radical ideas became the foundation of our church—including this congregation, which today celebrates its 254th anniversary.

Here's some more recent history: Six years ago, our anniversary lovefeast celebrated our oldest members, some of whom spoke to the congregation about their faith and their life in the church. Hazel Disher, then aged 97, told us she was still a work in progress. She is still a work in progress today, at 102. That was a great celebration, in November 2019.

By November 2020, however, I was writing a sermon for a very different lovefeast. That lovefeast would be “virtual,” because our doors were closed to the pandemic. Also, by that time in 2020, the energy, direction, and voice of the moment had been seized by the young.

Do you remember? The murder of George Floyd in May 2020; the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement; streets full of protestors, many of them very young. Some of them very young *members of this congregation*. They marched in downtown Winston-Salem and elsewhere to emphasize biblical values they learned from this congregation. Mark 12:31: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Deuteronomy 16:20, “Justice, justice you shall pursue.” Isaiah 3:15:

“‘What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?’ says the Lord God of Hosts.”

The young members of this church and their peers showed me that I needed to see, and grieve, and grapple with systemic injustice in America. Those young people furthered my education. But because of my age and because I was scared of getting COVID, most of my education consisted of reading on my couch, while the young had the energy and courage to put their education *and* their bodies to use in the pursuit of a better world.

And so, as I wrote my 2020 anniversary sermon, I wanted to celebrate the young. The high school and college students marching in the protests. The young adults building meaningful careers. The parents teaching their little children to strive for a better world. And of course, those little children themselves. I wrote that we should celebrate them all, even—especially—if they annoyed us, because being annoying was how they got us to see and hear them.

As it turned out, that was a sermon I would not preach. Between the time that I started writing it and the day of the lovefeast, events moved on; and, almost at the last minute, I laid that sermon aside and wrote a different one. But I always hoped to return to that original sermon. This year, you are hearing it.

Except that now, I’m not as sure what I want to say.

In 2020, I could see and hear the young. Of course I could; they were all over the news. I could *feel* the direction of their hopes, their frustrations, their energy, and their passions. They were a river that I hoped would carry all us old folks forward.

I still hope for that. More than ever, I long for the church worldwide to be carried forward by the young; because as everyday life looks less and less familiar, this old person finds it less and less likely that she knows where anything is leading.

At the same time, I'm less certain than in 2020 that I am hearing what the young are saying. Maybe that's because I'm losing my hearing; or maybe it's because I'm not listening. If the young are making news, I might not be aware, because—I confess this with shame—I can hardly bear to take in the news anymore. For that, I need more courage. Maybe I could get more courage from the young. Maybe the church could, too.

Then again: The church must also give courage to the young. It is the church's job to nourish the young, strengthen them, equip them; and then, set them free. Free to find their way forward—which is also the way forward for the church.

Our own Moravian history tells us that church can be a place of freedom for the young—*or not*. Today, do we welcome the new knowledge, the new ideas, the passion and the energy of the young? Or do we resist what feels like too much change? If we resist, will the lambs squeeze out through those cracks in the fence? Worse: Will we invite them to do so?

Some years ago I heard Moravian Bishop Carol Foltz ask: "How can the church be a place where people come to do what God is calling them to do, instead of a place people have to leave to do what God is calling them to do?" It's a really good question. On the other hand, young people heading for the exits may not be looking so much for escape, as for more enriching pasture. What if, instead of trying to tighten the fence, we followed them through the gate?

Today, as we celebrate our congregational anniversary, we continue to reflect on the festival of Christ as Chief Elder, which we marked last week with communion. Home Church's birthday is November 13, the same date as that worldwide Moravian festival.

Moravians' decision, in 1741, to acknowledge Christ as Chief Elder came when the previous chief elder, Brother Leonard Dober, found the job was too large for him. Why?

Because by then, the *church* had grown too large. Why? Because of all those *young people*, who not only created community in Herrnhut, Germany, but went on to establish communities all over the world. Wisely, our Moravian ancestors recognized that the only leader capable of guiding so much youthful energy was Jesus Christ.

Chief Elder is not the only name we use for Jesus. Drawing on today's gospel reading, assigned for the festival of November 13, we call Jesus a shepherd, whom the sheep will follow because they know his voice. But in this same text, Jesus also calls himself the gate of the sheepfold. "I am the gate," he says. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

Tighten the fence, and the lambs will flee through the cracks; but the gate invites the lambs to come in, *and* go out, and the flock is free. Free to find nourishment. Free to explore and experiment. Free to learn, free to engage, free to *annoy*. Do the lambs annoy us? Then let us see them, and hear them; and follow them through the gate, into abundant life. Amen.