

Call me a square if you want, but I much prefer to cross through walls, fences, barriers, or borders when I've been invited to do so. I don't like to jump fences. I hate to ignore "No Trespassing" signs. I rarely sneak in backdoors. I prefer to use crosswalks. I ALWAYS wait for the "WALK" signal. I suppose that makes me a "go through the gate with a ticket" kind of guy.

But there's something great about having the authority to walk through a gate. I remember finally being old enough to play little league baseball. My jersey gave me access to the inside of a dugout. I think about the sense of relief I used to have when I could manage to fish three quarters out of the center console of my car and toss them into the toll gates on GA-400. I think about how great it is to actually sit in good seats at a ball game, or a concert, or some other event, and not worry about being bumped out. I love getting through the other side of a gated parking lot without the gate-arm crashing down on the roof of my car. Most of all, I like coming through the doors of a place like Sardis Baptist Church – a place where access is granted for a simple reason: that a person is a child of God. It feels good to have access. It feels good to have a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Of course, gates aren't always so good, nor are they always easy. Many times access to gates is unfair. In other instances, access is at a premium. "Sold out" is not a sign we like to see. Martin Luther King lamented having to tell his little girl that the gates of Fun Town were closed to black children. Prisoners are granted access to gates, but those aren't the gates you necessarily wanna go through. Many of us were reminded in Vacation Bible School that "you can't get to heaven on roller skates, 'cause you'll roll right past those pearly gates." If only theological enlightenment was as easy as strapping on a pair of roller skates. There are other blocked gates, too. For illogical reasons, many of our neighbors fail to find access to the gates of dignity, the gates of compassion, and the gates that unlock essential human needs. Sometimes, gates are just downright cruel. And sometimes, like in our current crisis, gates are invisible.

Today's text is about gates. I suppose that's fitting. John's gospel describes a road less traveled, and we did just hear a poem from Robert Frost, and last week we traveled the road to Emmaus, and the current lection follows a narrative about a blind man who's on a spiritual journey, and in this age of Corona, we're

certainly travelling a different kind of path. I would never have guessed that the road less traveled would have taken us through of all things – a gate. Nevertheless, we'll attempt to walk through this gate together.

If you remember the story of the blind man in John 9, he follows a pattern similar to other protagonists in the gospel – he's one society doesn't think should be able to recognize God's presence, and yet, here is one, who seeing for the very first time, and with little theological training, sees the real Jesus.

Today's text follows this story. Jesus tells his listeners that he's come to restore sight to the blind, and to make blind those who presume to see. Some of the Pharisees ask Jesus, "Surely, we are not blind?" Jesus responds with a parable about gates and shepherds. We hear a description of an authentic shepherd and a phony shepherd, how each leads, and how each is granted access from a gatekeeper. Let's start with some background.

In ancient Palestine, the sheepfold was attached to a main building. So you can imagine a larger structure on a property, and then a kind of shoot that's attached to it. The only way to enter the sheepfold was to go through the gate at its end. A shepherd would guide his sheep on a journey from one sheepfold to another. As the shepherd reached the gate, he would be authorized for entry by a gatekeeper. Only the shepherd would be granted access. Someone without access would be a thief or an enemy.

Sheep follow shepherds because they are familiar with them. They trust them. In many instances, shepherds bestow nicknames on their sheep, and they know their movements and patterns. The sheep follow the shepherd through the gate of a sheepfold because of a mutual trust. The good shepherds can make this transaction with ease because they have a genuine concern and love for their sheep. Not so for a thief or an imposter who tries to lead his sheep. The sheep will not follow such a shepherd because his voice is unfamiliar.

In this parable Jesus is saying that he is two things. One, Jesus is our access to the gate of a full and abundant life. Two, Jesus is the good shepherd of our lives.

Why is Jesus the gate? Jesus gives us our authorization. Jesus is our salvation – that is, in the presence of the Earth-manifested Word, Jesus as human, we are able to see ourselves as unique children of God. Discarded well women, and blind sons, and other cast-outs aren't marginalized in the community of Jesus. Instead they are invited into soulful abundance, a common humanity and a common love, that even the harshest empire can't dilute. Jesus is SO committed to illumining this God of love, that he will be willing to lay down his life so that all might experience God's grace and God's presence...the life abundant. The Pharisees and other parties within the Temple establishment sought to be exclusive gatekeepers. They wanted to exclude sinners, especially those like the blind man who would dare to proclaim Jesus as a messiah.

And what makes Jesus the good shepherd of our lives? Jesus is the kind of shepherd who takes you through the front gate. Jesus is not an imposter like the Pharisees or some false prophet. Jesus doesn't sneak through the hole in the fence. His sheep follow him with ease in the light of day. The life and teachings of Jesus illumined a new way for us to live. When we follow the path of the Shepherd Jesus, we are invited into a community of believers. We shall not want because we are led into the green pastures of caring friends and nourishing fellowship. The rough waters of our lives are made still with the knowledge that Christ and his community of believers make the journey with us. Our souls are restored with prayer, presence, space, love, and grace.

Jesus is our gate of access to God, and he is the good shepherd that guides and protects our journey.

Okay, so there's our text. What should we make of it?

Well, I think that sometimes, there's a tendency for people to make this text a claim for Jesus as an exclusive pathway to the divine. One shepherd. One gate. Story over.

I think it's important to remember the context of John's gospel. The author's was a community that professed Jesus as messiah in a time when many other Jewish communities did not. And their belief in Jesus' messiahship ultimately led to a fracture in Judaism, which resulted in the earliest Christian communities. I think

we need to be mindful that absolute-sounding statements, and overly-harsh statements about specific groups often reflect the hurt of ostracized communities in their time (in this instance many decades after the death of Jesus), more so than they do the words of Jesus.

In this instance, I don't read the passage as Jesus saying, "I am the *only* shepherd, and the *only* gate." I read it as him saying, "I am an authentic gatekeeper, and an authentic shepherd – if you follow me, you are following someone who can help you commune as God's beloved, and I'm going to be true, earnest, and protective as someone who shepherds you."

I also think it can be helpful to explore what it is a good shepherd and a good gatekeeper do. Listen, y'all, there's plenty of green grass and still waters to be had. But what good are such grass and waters if they are absent from the presence of the shepherd-God?

God doesn't just lead us to a dinner table full of crisp iceberg lettuce and sparkling water. Because, like sheep, we are prone to wander. God offers us space – space that's distant enough from swift currents, in order that we can drink our fill in safety; space that's abundant enough, in order that we can graze tomorrow, too. And when we veer off course from our community of sheep and become separated – perhaps we've lost our sense of direction, or we've grown ill, or we're spending too much time consuming grass that can no longer feed us – God pursues us, protects us, calls us by our name, even longs for us. And God brings us back to community like a shepherd. And when it's time to move along to the next sheepfold, God helps us travel there, arriving through the front gate, in the light of day.

More than anything, what I think Jesus is trying to tell us this morning, is that God is familiar, and open, and accessible, and steadfast. Yes, you may be in tall green grass on the banks of still blue waters, approaching a sheepfold full of the finest golden hay. But if that voice that's leading you isn't familiar; if that voice doesn't know your name; if that voice doesn't call you beloved; if that voice doesn't intuit your needs; if that voice doesn't recognize your giftedness; if that voice doesn't beckon you, invite you, shepherd you into community with others, it's not the

voice of a shepherding God, and it's not the kind of voice the gatekeeper's gonna recognize in the light of day.

And I can't help but wonder, what did that shepherd voice sound like at an empty tomb, when it said, "Mary?!?" And what did it sound like in Emmaus, when it said, "This bread is for you! Take and eat?!?" And what did it sound like, when it said, "Thomas, here are my hands, and here are my sides?"

And what will that shepherd voice sound like when it calls to us in the days ahead? Well, I'm not sure how it'll sound, but I take comfort in the words I know it will say to me and to you, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you shall dwell in the house of the Lord your whole life long."

May it always be so! Amen.