



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 4 (A)

The Gate

[RCL]: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Even though we are in the season of Easter, our lives may still feel like one long Lenten discipline of social distancing and fighting illness. Even as we proclaim the truth of Easter resurrection, Good Friday's shadow still looms long. We know that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, is faithful. So, let's go to the scripture together and ask to be taught, to be healed, to be loved.

What we notice first is that of all the Good Shepherd Sunday texts in the lectionary, this gospel is by far the most abstract. Jesus clearly has something he wants to communicate to us, but his layers of symbolism are so dense that it's difficult to understand what he means beyond the obvious. In fact, John even tells us outright that this one is going to take some drilling down: "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

Traditionally, this text has often been used as a means of exclusion. Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit." People have used this saying to enforce false boundaries to shore up their own power, labeling as the proverbial "thieves and bandits" anyone who is "unorthodox," whether that means you have the "wrong" gender, sexuality, race, doctrine, belief, politics, liturgy, etc. "Not everyone is going to get saved," is the message the powerful take out of this text. "Jesus doesn't love everyone," is the subliminal – but far more honest – attitude underlying the pious concern for being "correct."

The farther we are driven into anger and fear, the harder it is to see any shades of subtlety. When we feel threatened, we sink into black and white thinking very quickly. All shades of gray are rendered invisible by our primal drive for security. Everything becomes very rigid, and suddenly we *love* Jesus' image of the sheepfold with the gate that is going to keep some people *out* because, by implication, it will keep those of us "on the inside" safe. We will have a holy and secure isolation from "those people," who will no longer be a threat. In this circle-the-wagons mentality, everything and everyone becomes rigidly locked into place. We imprison ourselves and everyone around us into roles of "good guy" and "bad guy." There is very little freedom in that place and very little love.

So, let's go back to the gospel. When we first read it, especially if we are feeling vulnerable, threatened and longing for security, all we see are walls, barriers, boundaries, and separation. That's what a fence with a gate is, right? But that is not what Jesus is talking about when he says, "I am the gate." He's not trying to keep people out, or even allow "us" to stay safely in. Nor is he trying to make us feel like we're not good enough to be let in, to join the insiders inside the sheepfold.

Stop and think for a moment. What is the purpose of the gate? It is precisely to create an opening in the fence. It is precisely to allow travel through the wall. It is a means of liberation, not a means of exclusion. When Jesus says, "I am the gate," it is his way of inviting us both in and out. He is telling us that he is our way to safety, to entering a restful place where we know we are loved and protected. But he is also telling us that we will need to go back out through that gate into the world. It is his invitation to leave safety and security and go back out into a world of challenges and stumbling blocks.

We might expect that of Jesus—that he would tell us that we are safe but that there is more to life than safety. We could understand that he does promise us sanctuary, but he also expects us to go back out and do the good work we are called to do, knowing that it may sometimes end with us feeling battered and bruised.

But where Jesus really gets subversive is when he calls *himself* the gate. He's not just saying, "There is a gate in all your carefully constructed, self-isolating walls." He's saying, "*I* am the gate in all your carefully constructed, self-isolating walls." It's this stealthy undermining means of salvation that is utterly brilliant.

Because that means that everything that we have labeled as a barrier is actually Jesus. Everything we have set up to protect ourselves is actually our very means of being called out into a life of adventure, possibility, and yes, strife and conflict. And those careful walls we've placed between ourselves and others? Jesus is the gate. He's made himself a secret entrance into our hardened hearts, and all kinds of scary people are going to get in. When we fully understand that Jesus is the gate—Jesus is the entry point into all change, depth, struggle, and love—it's simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating. As the saying goes, "God loves us exactly as we are, and God loves us far too much to leave us that way."

Martin Laird in *Into the Silent Land* tells a powerful story. He speaks of walking across a moor with a friend who had four dogs. As they walked, three of the dogs would run out across the moor, leaping over creeks and chasing rabbits and joyfully exploring their environment. But one of the dogs would only run in a small circle right in front of his owner. No matter how many miles they walked or how far afield the other dogs went, this dog would only run in a tight circle very close to them. Laird asked him why, and he replied, "This dog was kept for his entire life prior to coming to me in a very small cage. His body has left the cage, but his mind still carries it with him. For him, the world outside the cage does not exist, and so no matter how big and beautiful the moor, he will never run out across it. I bring him here so he can breathe the fresh air, but he's still running circles in his cage."

On a good day, when we're feeling confident and happy in God's love, seeing the glory of God's people and God's creation all around us, gray is beautiful. We set aside the comforting security of black and white thinking and dive into the shadowland between. Gray is possibility, opportunity, the treasure hidden in the field. We can handle and even appreciate nuance, subtlety, ambiguity, and the uncertainty that is the foundational characteristic of faith. But when we are hurting, weary, afraid, not only can we no longer see the shades of gray, we no longer want to. We are the dog who carries the cage with him out onto the moor. We think we're keeping ourselves safe, we think we're obeying the rules, but really, we're our own jailers. We're refusing to see the open gate in our hearts. We're refusing to see Jesus.

But we know Jesus is patient with our willful blindness. He says to all of us, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Sometimes we wish there were no gate. Sometimes we wish the barriers and boundaries we've placed around our hearts were bulletproof and siege-resistant. But before long, God reminds us that that aching hole in our hearts, where insight and possibility and all of these *people*, beautiful, flawed people, keep sneaking in—that is the very presence of Jesus who brings us rest in green pastures, beside the still waters.

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