

May 3, 2020
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Gate AND Shepherd

John 10:1-10

Introduction to the Scripture: Jesus' teaching for today has to be read in context. What Jesus here says to the Religious authorities is spoken in response to what has just happened in John's Gospel. So, before we read the text assigned for today, please allow me to give you the "cliff notes"/Ellen version of what happens just before Jesus speaks, and encourage you to do your own reading.

Jesus' disciples see a man born blind and ask Jesus – "Is he blind because of someone's sin?"
Jesus to Disciples – "No" – Then Jesus heals the man and restores his sight.

Neighbors and community are confused and say to the man – did this really happen? Are you the same guy?

Man to neighbors – Yes – Jesus healed me.

Pharisees get involved and ask the man – were you healed? What happened?

Man to Pharisees – Jesus healed me

Pharisees to each other and the crowd – Because Jesus healed you on the Sabbath he can't be from God.

Man to Pharisees – He healed me, I believe he is a prophet of God.

Pharisees confront the man's parents – was your son really blind? What do you know about his healing?

Parents to Pharisees – Yes this is our son. Yes, he was born blind. But he is old enough to speak for himself. No comment. Ask him.

Pharisees to the man – Give God the glory for your healing and not Jesus.

Man to Pharisees – I don't know about you, but Jesus healed me, so I give Jesus the glory.

Pharisees to Man – you are banished – leave and don't come back.

Jesus hears and finds the man – Do you believe in God? I am he.

Man to Jesus – I now see and believe!

Pharisees to Jesus – so are we blind?

Jesus to Pharisees – if you say so.

It is this whole crowd then, who hear this brief teaching that Jesus offers us.

John 10:1-10

This is not some comforting, fireside chat between Jesus and his faithful disciples. Jesus' words are a challenge and a judgment. The crowd is confused. The parents are afraid. The Pharisees are angry. The man who was healed is defiant. The Disciples thought that they had asked a

theoretical question about the man born blind, and now realize they have set off a firestorm. And Jesus walks straight into all of that. This is not a theoretical, theological debate. This story and teaching is about who we trust, who we follow and how we think we are related to God.

As I was standing in line, waiting my turn to go into the grocery store this week, I realized that gates both protect and limit. Gates mark a transition and separate those inside from those outside. Gates are about discipline, control, obedience, submission, belonging, and passage. When I am outside of the gate, I feel excluded and frustrated. When I am inside the gate, I feel included and protected. And Jesus is the gate – he says.

To acknowledge that Jesus is the Gate means that we must give up our illusions that we can find a better way, or that we can get in by climbing over the wall to get what we want. But we humans are masters at figuring out how to go around. Rather than eat good food in moderation, we are all about taking a pill that promises that we can lose 20 pounds in 2 weeks while eating what we want. We like to think about how we can get something for nothing. The state Lottery's success is clearly tied to our illusions and dreams about how to climb over the wall, bypass the gate and get what we want without going through the gate.

But Jesus confronts our limit-resisting, self-centered, discipline-disliking selves: "I am the gate", says Jesus. This is another way of saying what Jesus says again to his disciples in John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This is a tough stumbling block for many – and not just those outside the church. This affirmation that Jesus is The Gate is offensive for all of us who are proud, who think that we are in control, and who like to determine ourselves how we live and where we go. We do not like limits, and Jesus here says clearly that he is a limit – the gate. Those who try to go around the gate are thieves and bandits.

And this affirmation of Jesus as gate is offensive for those who think of themselves as the gate. The Religious leaders in John's gospel believe that THEY are the gate. Jesus can't be from God, they say, because he doesn't abide by their rules for the Sabbath. Christians have a long and terrible history of believing that they are the gate. The Protestant Reformation – and all of its resulting death and destruction – might not have happened if the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church had not confused themselves and the institution of Church with the gate. The Church is not the gate. I am not the gate. You are not the gate. Jesus Christ is the gate.

For those who want to judge others, this is offensive. If we read this scripture and wonder about someone else's salvation, then we have made ourselves the gate. If we read this scripture and decide that every person who does not believe as we believe – everyone who does not keep the Sabbath according to our rules – is not from God, then we have confused ourselves with the gate. And Jesus says very clearly that we are not the gate – only he is the gate – and anyone who does not acknowledge that is a thief and a bandit.

But Jesus as gate is also comforting and clear. Jesus as the gate is clear direction for those who want to know safety, inclusion and life abundant. Those looking for life and joy and safety and

pasture can embrace the fact that we can enter by the gate to know God and salvation. For those who want to know God, this is a clear direction. Jesus is the gate. Seek to know Jesus – that is the path to real life. To those who are afraid or confused, this is comforting and clear.

Jesus is the gate is either comforting or offensive. Where do we find ourselves today?

If maybe it is a little bit of both, then it is important to remember that Jesus says that he is BOTH Gate AND Good Shepherd. And the good shepherd knows our names and calls us to follow him. The good shepherd is the one who knows the way to good pastures and still, clear water. The good shepherd is the one who will not run away when we are threatened or afraid. The good shepherd is available to be in relationship. Notice that the shepherd that Jesus describes is a shepherd whom the sheep follow out of love and trust.

We are accustomed to a shepherd being one who drives the sheep ahead using a stick and a sheep dog to keep errant sheep in order. And, some mistakenly believe that this is how God works. Instead, Jesus the good shepherd says that God calls us each by name and invites us to follow him to green pastures and still waters. Jesus the good shepherd walks ahead of us and we can choose – or choose not – to follow based on our relationship with the good shepherd. No coercion. No stick. No dog to nip us if we wander.

Jesus is BOTH the gate AND the good shepherd. Jesus is the way to security, relationship and life abundant. But to follow the good shepherd we must give up

- Our illusions that we can go around the gate and still get to life abundant
- Our illusions that we are wiser than the shepherd or can make our own gates.
- Our illusions that we are the gate or the judge

And to get to security, relationship with God and life abundant, we must embrace

- A willingness to follow and trust – in God (not confusing the institution of the church or the preacher for God)
- The call to follow – not staying where we are, but following wherever the shepherd leads – even when we don't know where the shepherd is going.
- The invitation to get to know God so that we will be able to recognize God's voice when we do hear it.

In this time of confusion, fear, anger and judgment, Jesus offers us an invitation. Enter by the gate that is Christ. Follow the shepherd who is good. We are all invited to seek to know Jesus. Now is the time to read Scripture every day – while we are confused and afraid. Now is the time to pray – every day. And by pray, I mean both talking to God and listening. Without learning to wait on God – without developing the strength to wait in silence – I don't believe we can be changed.

So – as we wait – today is the day to begin to seek to know God better. God is most fully known to us in the person of Jesus Christ – the gate AND the good shepherd. Will we accept the invitation to make time, as we wait for life to return to more normal rhythms, to read Scripture

each day? Will we make time to pray by speaking to God and to pray by sitting silently to listen – trying to get to know the voice of the shepherd who calls us all to follow?

This story invites us to trust God – both gate and shepherd God – as the only one who knows how to lead, save and bless. This story invites us to follow Jesus – not theoretically, but daily and practically – getting to know Jesus in Scripture and living as he says to live. And this story reassures us that the God that we trust, love and follow knows our names, calls us by name, and today invites us to follow. Who do we trust? Who do we follow?

Jesus said, you are known by name. You are loved. You are invited to follow Jesus.