Fourth Sunday of Easter + The Good Shepherd

Read: John 10.1-10

Reflection

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 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, labelling 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," or "Jesus doesn't love everyone," is the message they take in their 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 grey 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. Everything and everyone become 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 labelled 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."*

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, grey is beautiful. Gray is possibility, opportunity, the treasure hidden in the field. But when we are hurting, weary, afraid, not only can we no longer see the shades of grey, we no longer want to. 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. 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.

A Prayer   Merciful Father,
you gave your Son Jesus Christ to be the good shepherd
and in his love for us to lay down his life and rise again:
keep us always under his protection,
and give us grace to follow in his steps;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.