

The Jesus Gate

1 Peter 2:19-25, John 10: 1-10

Dr. George R. Sinclair

A wooden fence encloses our backyard. It has three gates. One is locked most of the time. Another is unlocked when we're working outside. And the third, which is the one we use most, is never locked. We don't advertise the unlocked gate, so don't tell anyone, not that it would make much difference. If someone wanted, they could break down the gate; for that matter, they could knock down the fence. Neither is very strong. Still, I like having an enclosed back yard. People are discouraged from slipping in and taking things that don't belong to them or peeking in our windows, not that there would be much to see!

Our fence with three gates creates a defined space and I like that. I don't have to worry about my neighbors or their azaleas or their pets. I have my own garden to tend. I like that. How about you?

"I am the gate," says Jesus. "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

"I am the gate."

John called it a "figure of speech." Figures of speech, like jokes and parables, are more enjoyed than explained. Story tellers have long understood that parables and jokes provoke imagination in ways that rational discourse does not. It's good to laugh at ourselves. Laughter allows us to see differently. Humor can be more than mood altering. It can be life changing.

Of course there are times when we resist humor. When the joke is on us we dig in our heels. Something like that happens when Jesus refers to himself as "the gate." Jesus' listeners don't understand him. The confusion wasn't semantic. The listeners "got" what Jesus was saying; they simply didn't want to go where Jesus was taking them. So Jesus tried another approach. Appealing to reason, he explained his figure of speech.

While it's not entirely clear who resisted Jesus' figure of speech, the most likely candidates are the Pharisees, earlier called "blind" by Jesus because they were more interested in blaming and labeling people rather than naming them children of God and welcoming them into the fold.

People have long fretted over who's in and who's out. What was it the poet said, "Good fences make good neighbors"? The Pharisees weren't the first to use boundaries. Where would we be without boundaries? We all need "personal space." There is no "self" apart from differentiation. We all need fences. Without a fence there is no "me" or "you." By the same token, what is a fence without a gate? A fence without gates is like a house without doors. Maybe it's possible, but no one could live long or well in a house without doors. A house without doors sounds more like a box; better yet, a prison, which suggests that a fence without gates is about as useless or harmful as a house

without doors. So, yes, we need boundaries, but we also need a gate. None of us is an island, not that we're not tempted to be that both individually and collectively.

"It is not good for the man to be alone."

That was God's verdict. "It is not good for the man to be alone." Humans are social creatures. We all know that. Our humanity requires other humans and here's where being human gets complicated and sometimes dangerous but alternately wonderful. Whom do we let in and whom do we keep out? The question is as old as the Bible itself: "Am I my brother's keeper? Who is my neighbor? Where do we set the fence that distinguishes *me* from *you*, *us* from *them*? Are there terms and conditions for who gets in and who stays out? The Pharisees thought they knew and Jesus called them "blind."

"I am the gate," Jesus says. "I am the gatekeeper."

It's easy to see or feel the commotion Jesus caused. "I'm not so sure I want Jesus to be my gate and my gatekeeper. What if he lets in somebody I don't like or who is not to my liking? Can I really trust Jesus to determine the boundaries of who's in and who's out? I know he says he will protect me but I've met some real thieves and bandits who come in only to steal and kill and destroy. Can I trust Jesus to be my gatekeeper? Surely there's a line somewhere? I know he promises green pastures, but can we be sure? What about those who are not like us? What about Baptists or Catholics? Methodists are fine—they're nice to everybody—Methodists would swat a fly. And Episcopalians—now they sure know how to worship—sharp dressers; but Pentecostals, Evangelicals? Next he'll have me sitting beside a fundamentalist. Can we really trust Jesus to lead and protect us? Shouldn't we establish boundaries, some terms and conditions for who's in and who's out? There must be standards; after all, there is no *me* without *you*, no *us* without *them*."

From the time I entered high school, I heard about a place called *The Cellar*. Our town didn't have a place like *The Cellar* where you had to be eighteen to enter, which meant that if you weren't eighteen you had to look eighteen or else have a fake ID. Everybody talked about *The Cellar*. Getting in was a rite of passage.

Patrons entered *The Cellar* by descending a long, dark flight of stairs where at the bottom a bouncer awaited them. If you looked eighteen or presented a fake ID, you got in. And if you didn't have a fake ID or look eighteen, you hit the road. Nobody wanted to hit the road. What a shame. Everybody wanted in. It was cool to get in, because once you got in, you could always come back. Once you passed the ID check and paid the cover charge your hand was stamped with an insignia that glowed in the dark. *The Cellar* was famous for its "black lights" which not only allowed patrons to go in and out but also lit up the dance floor with smiling teeth and white shirts—you know that wonderful 70's glow. Getting in *The Cellar* was a big deal, at least as big as the dancing and the adolescent indulgences promised upon entry. That was half the fun—getting in, seeing if you could pass for eighteen. And once you got in, boy that was something; you were the stuff—cool—or so we imagined.

Since then I've passed through other gates as I imagine you have: gates at airports, border crossings; college exams; board certifications; club memberships. These days boarding an airplane takes an act of Congress. And for sure you don't want to fail

the scanner. Maybe we all need personal scanners, but then someone clever would come up with a fake ID and we'd be back at square one.

Troublesome, isn't it? The Jesus Gate changes everything. No pretense, no fake IDs. We're known from the inside out—all of us. And the only way in is grace. The only way through the Jesus Gate is forgiveness, forgiveness that we can't earn or merit or give ourselves. With Jesus there's no pretending, no fake ID—just confession: “Lord, save me.” And once Jesus says us to us, once we're in, we don't get to discriminate; we don't set the terms of admission because if forgiveness is for us, for me, then forgiveness is for all.

Imagine a life like that. Imagine a church like that—no more judging; no more tests to see who's in and who's out. A life like that, a church like that would be something. Imagine a community which not only welcomes but advocates the dignity of difference—not simply a community that says “live and let live,” but one where we actually learn and benefit from difference. Imagine a life and a church where we don't have to pretend or fake it. No more pretenses. No more pecking order. No more insiders and outsiders. No more in-groups and out-groups—just one group, a community of welcome, a community where the dignity of difference is not simply tolerated but championed.

“I am the Gate.”

Imagine a life where Jesus is the Gate. Imagine a church where Jesus is the Gate. What freedom; what joy. No more pretenses. No more faking it; a community of welcome, a community of embrace, a community with one Gate and one Gatekeeper—the Good Shepherd who calls his own and his own follow him to green pastures beside still waters.

“I am the Gate.”

What a life that would be; what a church that would be; what a world that would be. Maybe it's just a figure of speech; or maybe it's the truth, God's truth about being you and me—about being us—one race, the human race where there is one fold and one Shepherd, the Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. Amen.