

We encounter Jesus in this morning's Gospel just after he has healed the man born blind. The Pharisees have been eavesdropping on Jesus' explanation to the healed individual that he (Jesus) is the Son of Man; Jesus uses this miracle as the opportunity to teach about the difference between spiritual blindness and sensory blindness. The Pharisees arrogantly confront Jesus by explaining that surely they see.

What follows is this morning's passage where Jesus describes his role in the cosmic story to the Pharisees. Of course the passage of Scripture that comes later is the Good Shepherd text, so what we have today serves as a preamble to a bigger story.

He begins by saying, "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." In some circles, this verse (plucked out of its fuller context) has been used to enforce imaginary boundaries and to prop up those in positions of authority, labeling as the proverbial 'thieves and bandits' anyone who doesn't fit with accepted standards: the wrong sexuality, the wrong political affiliation, or the wrong church affiliation, the wrong way of doing things. The message, without its fuller context, communicates that some are worthy of God's acceptance and others are not.

If we approach this Gospel lesson feeling vulnerable or threatened, the image that sticks with us may be the bit about these thieves and bandits, or we may hear this teaching in terms of barriers, boundaries and separation ~ about how the beloved are on the inside while the bad guys are meant to be excluded.

That insider/outsider dynamic is not what Jesus is talking about when he says, "I am the gate."¹ He's not trying to keep "them" out and "us" safely in. He goes on to say, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Note that he makes a point to say that those who enter are not to stay inside forever. Knowing that they may return to the comfort and security formed by the community within the fold, they are also called to go out: they are to find their nourishment and recreation outside the sheepfold. And regardless of where they find themselves, the voice of their shepherd will always be within earshot.

¹ This is one of 7 "I am" statements by Jesus in the Gospel of John:

1. *And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).*
2. *Then Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12).*
3. *"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9).*
4. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).*
5. *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live" (John 11:25).*
6. *Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6).*
7. *"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1).*

So what is the purpose of the gate, if not to keep some in and others out?

It is useful to know a bit about the construction of sheepfolds: they have walls or fences on four sides, with thorns or brambles serving as a sort of barbed wire on top. There is no door on a sheepfold ... rather the shepherd lies on the ground across the outside of the opening at night so that any wolves or other predators would have to step over him to get to the enclosed sheep.

The gate, therefore, creates an opening. It allows movement both into and out of an enclosed space. In this context, Jesus describes himself as a means of liberation, not a means of exclusion, in stark contrast to the teachings and practices of the more controlling, legalistic Pharisees of Jesus' day. The sheep are invited both in and out through Jesus. He is the means to both security and freedom. Despite the reality that there will be struggle and hardship for the sheep outside the fold (and at times from within the fold), they can trust that the shepherd will always be able to reach them.

It is this very trust that the Gospel writer John had in mind when he uses the metaphor of sight: trust that God's love is liberating and ever-present, valuing relationship over what some may deem to be 'right practice.'

There's a story of two friends who went for a long walk in the countryside. One brought along his three dogs. Two of the dogs bounded up ahead and out of sight, eager to explore and run around. The third dog kept circling the friends as they walked, never more than a few paces away, and constantly watching his master. The friend who did not have dogs asked why this one behaved so differently. "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 no matter how big and beautiful the (countryside), 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."²

The narrow confines of the self-isolating walls we construct for ourselves provide a false sense of security and control when so much around us seems unmanageable or unpredictable. The call to engage with the world beyond our comfort zones is something easily forgotten when we buy into the divisive narratives of exclusivity.

It is to the pasture of abundant life that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us, free from whatever might hem us in: guilt, anger, loneliness, not-enoughness, addiction, fear of the other, fear of oneself... We have no need to run in tight circles like the man's dog, unwilling to risk living life, because there is no cage.

Everything we have labelled as a barrier is actually Jesus. Which means that everything we have set up to protect ourselves is the very means of being called out into a life of possibility, change, and growth. Jesus is the gate to our carefully-constructed, self-isolating walls: the entry into love and adventure and a more abundant life.

² Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land*.

Dorothy Day, the famous 20th century journalist and activist, describes in her autobiography how she lived in a cage of loneliness for far too long. To move through that sense of isolation, engagement with her community became the driving force of her life. Day writes, “The final word is love... To love we must know each other ... and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, where there is companionship. We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.”³

Yet we all have fences and barriers of various sorts that we’ve created in our interior space. We all have our worries and fears and doubts, which cloud our vision of the abundance of life and love that surrounds us on every side.

This week, I encourage you to spend some time in prayer about how Jesus might be inviting you beyond the enclosed spaces of your heart, and find someone you trust (a friend, a family member, your priest) to talk to about it. Allow your trusted person the opportunity to support you and help you recognize the voice of our Good Shepherd as you explore the freedom to pass through his gate into the *green pastures and beside the still waters* of a life outside your self-imposed cage. The Psalmist assures us that we cannot venture too far from God’s care when he says “The Lord shall watch over your going out and coming in from this time forth for evermore.”⁴ God desires that you have *life*, and have it abundantly.

³ *The Long Loneliness: An Autobiography of Dorothy Day*

⁴ Psalm 121:8