

I read a poem the other day called 'The Pleasures of the Door' by Francis Ponge. It begins: "Kings never touch doors. They're not familiar with this happiness: to push, gently or roughly before you one of these great, friendly panels...."¹

There is power in opening and closing doors; in being the keeper of the gate. You choose who comes in. And who goes out. And when. And why.

When you're the king, you get to construct fortifications and walls around the place you live. Do you think they are better at keeping people out, or keeping people in?

The king appoints a gate-keeper. Presumably, that person opens the gate, allows passage in and out, but we more often read about their skill in drawing the bridge, perhaps just in time, preventing the enemy from penetrating and gaining access to the sacred space within.

The king does not do this work himself. The power of keeping the gate is not insignificant, but not as great as the king's. No, the king tends to more important business.

Rich men do not have fortified city walls, but often enough a fence. Same purpose, I suppose. To keep some people out. Perhaps to keep others in. Their gates are the latching kind, not the drawbridge kind. There is peace and security "which you are agreeably assured by the click of the powerful, well-oiled latch."²

The Gospel story of the Rich Man and Lazarus has bugged me all week: this image of an uncrossable chasm; of the unwillingness to listen; of an inability to recognize the presence of one who longs for what the rich man might possibly choose to offer ...

My first knee-jerk reaction to the story is to object ~ that's not so! Chasms are crossed every day. When we choose love in the face of indifference or cruelty, the barrier is breached.

¹ Translated by CK Williams from Francis Ponge, *Selected Poems* (1994).

² Ibid.

I'm reminded of our backyard when we moved to Germany when our kids were small. It backed up to the road that circled the neighborhood, and consequently there was a lot of traffic going by at all hours – bikes, cars, and a good bit of foot traffic as well.

All of the homes in our neighborhood had low fences surrounding their yard. Not chain link, but a rather attractive wrought iron kind of thing, about a meter high, the kind with pointy spear points at the tip. High enough to keep small children contained (or so we at one time were naïve enough to believe. Ha! But that's another story for another day), but low enough that if you were sitting down in a lawn chair, your view of the playground across the street would not be obstructed.

One thing to know about living in a large European city: there are strong cultural mores about not looking in the windows of others houses when walking through the city. It'd be easy to do, especially in the evenings or at night when the living spaces are lit up inside. But it's a real no-no. When a space is densely populated, it's hard to achieve much privacy, but in Munich at least, peeping is more or less *verboten*. Same goes for fenced in yards. If a yard is fenced, it is considered a private family space to be enjoyed ~ no one from outside should acknowledge your presence, much less whatever it is you're doing in your outdoor living space.

On a warm summer day when my next-door neighbor's kid was about 4 years old, her mom heard her outside saying in his sweet toddler voice – in German – “Hi, My name is Olek. I'm four years old. Hallo. Ich heisse Olek. Ich bin vier Jahre alt.” After hearing this five or six times, his mom walked out and asked him what he was doing. An older gentleman was standing there on the other side of the fence with a big smile on his face.

Her son turned to her and said, “I'm introducing myself. When I say hi, people stop and ask me my name. When they ask me my name, they ask how old I am. I'm answering their questions before they ask. It's very friendly of me.” My neighbor couldn't very well argue with him, despite all the ways he was breaking the social contract. Olek is the type of kid who has never met a stranger. For him, every new person he's ever encountered is a friend he's not yet met.

Self-offering, incarnate love, has the power to overcome chasms of all kinds. The fence around Olek's yard was intended to keep him safe, and serves as a perfect example of a barrier that is both respected and overcome in the most important way: an insider and outsider making a connection ~ despite age, social norms, or the physical impediment between them.

Jesus' death on the cross is the ultimate chasm-crosser. Nothing, Paul reminds us in Romans, in all of creation can keep us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So what of Abraham's words in the parable this morning? "...between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us."

What if ...

What if we are the Rich Man? What if we're the one who is locked away, secure in the illusion that outside forces cannot come in and threaten us? What if that barrier, that chasm, is one that we have built and fortified by our own ... fear? Ignorance? Guilt? Hurt? Anger? Indifference? Is it possible that God loves us and values our agency and free will enough that if we choose not to allow anyone in, and if choose not to venture out, that our self-imposed isolation will be respected? Is it possible that all the many ways we devise to protect ourselves and our own interests – our privacy fences, our security cameras, our rainy day funds, our highly-edited social networking profiles, even our curated wardrobes – do little more than further isolate us?

Or for some of us, perhaps it's the overly-full social calendar or extraordinarily long work hours or any of a million excuses to not be alone because we are alienated from ourselves, and are fearful of teetering at the edge of the chasm within.

(shift) Did you notice how the Rich Man does not ask Lazarus, or Abraham, or even God to come and rescue him from his torment? It's his choice to be there. All he asks for is a brief moment of refreshment. When he could have eternal refreshment just like that! {SNAP} It's an odd choice that he makes: to remain locked in where he is ~ but it's one that is clearly respected.

(shift) What if the chemistry of personality and imagination and resource and insight and energy that we possess are the exact formula for what a nearby hurting person needs?

What if the poor and ill and lonely and grieving and angry and hateful that reside just outside the gate of our hearts need nothing more than to be seen, encouraged, tended to, cared for, supported, and loved? What if the unique image we reflect of God (imperfect though it may be) is the precise one that can bring restoration to a particular broken heart? Have we locked it away ... made it inaccessible ... placed

too many arbitrary conditions on its availability? What if that poor or ill or lonely or grieving or angry or hateful person outside our gate is really ourself?

(shift) The only chasms between ourselves and others ... the only chasms between ourselves and God ... are the ones of our own construction. God can overcome them. We all know that. But it may be that God respects our isolation and all the resulting torment unless we choose differently. God's nature is to stand at our door and knock and wait patiently for us to open up, not forcing God's way in. That's the free will we have.

I think my neighbor's son Olek is on to something: we get to choose be known and seen and valued in a way that is respectful of the boundaries which exist for our health and safety, as well as know and see and value others. We get to choose to collaborate with God in a kingdom in which we are keepers of the gate: we are the ones who are empowered to invite everyone and welcome everyone, and where all who desire it can find refuge, refreshment, and restoration ~ including ourselves.