

I Am the Gatekeeper

When my children were young, we took a family trip to Disneyland. I recall an immense parking lot and large Main Gate to Disneyland. When we walked through the Main Gate, we entered into a Magic Kingdom! It's a Small World, Pirates of the Caribbean, the Magic Castle, Disney parades, Fantasy Land, Tomorrow Land, Adventure Land! Many of you have probably been to Disneyland. What are your memories? I remember visiting Disneyland the second week it was open. Much has changed since then including the admission price, but it still is a magical place.

Many types of gates dot the towns and hillsides, cities and industries all around us. These gates can give us a lot of information, if we pay attention to them and really take notice. Some gates are to keep people (or animals) out, and others are to keep them in. And some are so old they aren't doing much good anymore. Some gates are welcoming, others formidable. But so much of all this depends on our perspective, doesn't it?

If we live in a gated community, we welcome the protection; but if we are incarcerated, the gate keeps us from freedom. In today's Gospel lesson Jesus tell us we must enter by the gate. No one can enter his pasture by climbing over the fence but only through the gate. Jesus is the gatekeeper who calls us by name. We follow Him because we listen and know his voice.

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus claims to provide the critical elements of abundant life: water, bread of life, light of the world, and shelter in the form of a sheepfold. It reminds us of the imagery of Psalm 23: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake. I will fear no evil. Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in house of the Lord forever.

What a simple solution! Wow! We just discovered the magic gate and now our lives will be joy, bliss, abundance, and our "cup will runneth over"! Well, that is the end of the sermon! You now have the answer. Go and enjoy life to the fullest!

Wait! Why am I delivering this homily on Zoom? Why aren't we in the sanctuary? The reason is we have the corona virus pandemic and a Stay at Home order that was just extended through May. Washington state has 14,327 confirmed cases, Skagit county, 329, and Anacortes less than 20. Washington has 814 deaths, Skagit County – 13. Unemployment claims in Washington state this past week were 137,605. A year ago, the number of claims were 5,709. Obviously, many citizens of our state are adversely affected by this virus and struggling! Watching the news just reinforces the idea that either very few people are following Jesus through the gate or there is more to what Jesus is telling us.

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 inside. Nor is He trying to make us feel like we're not good enough to be let in, to join the insiders.

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 and valued. 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 enter into a world of challenges and stumbling blocks.

However, we need to understand that while He promises us sanctuary, 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. Implied in this expectation, Jesus is also telling us to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

The Epistle for today is not a general appeal that all Christians should suffer, but a specific address to those who already find themselves suffering. It is a reminder that God is with them in their suffering and a call to remain faithful despite their circumstances. As we live our lives, we encounter challenges and have experiences that cause us suffering. We also see those around us who are suffering.

The Epistle reminds us that Christ suffered and died for our sins. It is a reminder that when we have suffered or sinned, we have already been welcomed back into the fold under the care of the shepherd.

It is important to remember that Jesus, as God's Son, displays the very image of God. Christ provides the model and foundation for life then and now. As Christ's followers, we are clothed in Christ. We are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved. Christ is all and in all – Christ is in us! And so we are to love one another in a way that is not hidden. Our life in Christ should be a beacon to everyone. We are to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek and patient. What a daunting task! But if we are able to do this, to love one another as Christ has loved and is loving us, we will be bound together in a perfect way with each other and with Christ.

Have you ever imagined what it would have been like to be a member of the church in its foundational stages, as described today in the Book of Acts? The stories you would hear would not be ones that had been handed down across millennia, but they would be stories told by people who had been with Jesus, seen the miracles, heard His voice.

The church was not an institution yet; it did not have its liturgies or doctrine figured out. There were no dioceses holding together groups of people. It was something much more basic: People were in awe of the risen Christ and the miracles worked in his name, and they felt drawn to gather in celebration of this.

Christ Church is a special place where we are His sheep and Jesus is nurturing us in His pasture. Our practice of Total Common Ministry enables each of us to be a part of the ministry of Jesus, experience his love, and listen as He speaks to each of us. When we enter Christ Church all of us pass through the same “gate” into the Nave and Sanctuary, regardless of who we are or what we have done. While that has changed with the corona virus the same concept still applies. We are his sheep and have been invited to enjoy His green pastures and still waters.

During this time of pandemic and sheltering at home, we have an opportunity to make or reaffirm a choice. We have an opportunity to cast away fear and draw close to God. We can rejoice with gladness in our Hearts that Jesus is with each of us. When we may only see the darkness of the time we know our “Gatekeeper” had left the gate open for us to enter into the green pastures and still waters. God values and loves each of us no matter what we have done or who we are. Through Christ Jesus, we can draw close to God – allow God to wrap His arms around each of us.

In closing I would like to share an idea with you. I have a \$20 bill. It’s not brand new but relatively new! There is a picture of Andrew Jackson, a serial number, the numeral 20, and the words, Twenty Dollars. Trust me. It has value, specifically \$20. If each of you could simply touch your computer screen and voila you now have a \$20 bill in your hand, will you do it? I think you will. Now if I crumble this bill, throw it on the ground, pick it up, and give you the same offer, will you still take it? I think you will. Why? Because it still has a value of \$20!

Take a moment and think of yourself as that \$20 bill, or \$100, \$500, or \$1,000 bill. (I just don’t carry that kind of bills in my wallet!) You are unique, special, and have value. When you were young and first entered this world, you were like that new, crisp, \$20 bill. But as time goes on, you grew, matured, then matured some more. In addition, you experienced suffering – sickness, loss of loved ones, financial ups and downs, tragedies, just like the \$20 bill that is passed from person to person, gets crumbled, wrinkled, and thrown to the ground. Like the crumbled, used \$20 bill still has the same value, each of you has the same value in the eyes of God and his son, Jesus. Today, Jesus invited you to enter the gate, experience abundant life but when you are suffering know He is there for you, loves you, and always wants YOU as one of the sheep in His pasture.

AMEN