

**April 30, 2023**  
**The Gate**  
**John 10:1-10**

**10** “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. **2** The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. **4** When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. **5** They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” **6** Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. **7** So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who came before me are thieves and bandits, but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

Please pray with me:

God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

My favorite line in our passage today is “Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was trying to say to them.” If I were in the crowd, I am quite certain I would be one of his listeners scratching my head and saying, “Huh?” In fact, I’ve been doing it all week.

It seems to me like a jumble of mixed metaphors. It’s so full of images that it is hard to know where to focus. That’s what mixed metaphors do. Instead of promoting understanding they confound it. It’s no wonder Jesus’ audience doesn’t understand.

It’s like he’s trying to run it up the flagpole and see what sticks.

It’s like pulling teeth from a hen.

It’s like he has opened a Pandora’s box of worms.

Maybe I’m just not the brightest bulb in the drawer.

I just can’t see the carrot at the end of the tunnel.

I guess we’ll just have to scratch the tip of the iceberg.

Mixed metaphors can be hilarious. Archie Bunker, in the old television series, “All in the Family” was the king of mixed metaphors. He would sit in his lazy boy and pontificate with gems like, “We better not, ya know, kill our chickens before they cross the road.”

The word metaphor comes from two ancient Greek words: *meta* means beyond and *phor* comes from a verb that means to carry. A metaphor is a figure of speech that carries you beyond the actual meaning of the words. A mixed metaphor is a figure of speech that includes a mixture of images.<sup>1</sup> We are told in our passage today that Jesus uses a figure of speech, but no one can figure it out.

Jesus mixes metaphors in such a way it leaves us scratching our heads. Shepherds, gatekeepers, thieves, bandits...what is Jesus talking about? Who is this message for?

Seeing that no one understands what he is saying, Jesus says it more plainly. "I am the gate."

In my world, gates come with both positive and negative connotations. Every day when I leave and come home, I wait for a big iron gate to open to enter and exit my condo complex. The gate keeps certain people out and approved people in. That gate is the only way in and out.

Is that what Jesus is saying here? Is he saying he is the only authorized access point? He lets certain people in and keeps others out. That is how some choose to understand this. Those who have the right code, or believe the right things, are the only ones who are allowed in.

The problem with that way of thinking is that it contradicts the story just before this passage, which is the story of the healing of the man born without sight. The Pharisees start questioning this man, trying to figure out how it is that he is now able to see. When they ask his parents, they are afraid to speak, because, we learn, that anyone who believes Jesus is the Messiah will be kicked out of the synagogue. When the Pharisees speak to the healed man, all he knows is that he was born blind but now can now see and only someone from God could do that. They don't like that answer so they kick him out and drive him away. This man is not allowed access, the Pharisees and religious leaders use their authority to keep him out.

They are supposed to be shepherds – and not just shepherds – but good shepherds. But instead of using their authority to care for their flock – they restrict access and leave sheep vulnerable and unattended. A good shepherd leads the flock to the gate of the sheepfold, where they are protected and tended at night, and then lets them out to eat in the pastures during the day. Good shepherds use the gate and it is presumed that anyone who does not use the gate is a thief or bandit.

I am inclined to think that Jesus is talking about the religious leaders who can't see the gate when he is standing right in front of them. They are bound up with concern over preserving the faith with rules and codes; the ones they deem most important. They are concerned about their authority as leaders, which Jesus seems to subvert. But where is their concern for the sheep?

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<sup>1</sup> Pastor Dawn: Beyond Church, "What's a Meta For?" May 2, 2017

Jesus was in conflict with many of the religious leaders of his time, because he exposed their self-interest and misguided legalism. Not unlike the prophet Ezekiel exposing the shepherds of his time. Ezekiel 34 says:

*Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. (Ezekiel 34:2b-4)*

In Ezekiel's time, kings and civic leaders, in addition to religious leaders were considered shepherds. And Ezekiel expresses God's displeasure at their poor shepherding.

Jesus sees the shepherds of his day heading down that same path.

"I am the gate," says Jesus. Jesus' teachings, Jesus' example is the gate to the fold. The way of Jesus is the way to God, the way of love and tenderness is the way to God, the way of forgiveness and healing is the way to God, the way of justice and kindness is the way to God, the way of compassion and care for the vulnerable is the way to God. And the way to God is the way of life in all its fullness for all people.

Jesus the gate gives us access to a way of life and love (this is God incarnate) – he's not giving us the access code to an exclusive community of the saved. Jesus was a model of God's expansive love and tender concern for all God's sheep.

It is in this way of expansive love and tender concern that I am called to shepherd you – leading you to the gate. Returning again and again to the way of Jesus.

Recently, I heard a Lutheran Bishop sharing a story about a phone call she received. The woman was calling to complain about her pastor. Amid the political division and hostility our country was experiencing after the insurrection on Jan. 6, the caller was angry about the scripture passage her pastor chose for the sermon. She felt it was intentionally chosen to attack certain members of the congregation. "What was the scripture reading?" asked the Bishop.

The offensive passage of scripture turned out to be the opening words to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount known as the beatitudes. It was the lectionary reading for that Sunday.

"I am the gate," says Jesus. Meanwhile, there are shepherds preaching prosperity; shepherds abusing their flock; shepherds lining their own pockets; shepherds ruling like tyrants; shepherds more concerned about preserving their brand of religion over the well-being of the sheep; shepherds promoting exclusion, hatred, prejudice, and division; shepherds who have lost sight of the gate.

In recent years we have seen a movement to reclaim Jesus. From Red Letter Christians to books like Jim Wallis' "Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus," or Dan Wakefield's "The Hijacking of Jesus: How the Religious Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Prejudice and Hate." There is a movement to rediscover the radical Jesus and his campaign of love and compassion and justice.

"I am the gate," says Jesus. For those of us who know little to nothing about shepherding and sheep, this passage is a thicket of metaphors. In a time of upheaval and conflicting voices, the gospel writer wanted his flock to know the way that leads to life.

And here we are, in our own season of upheaval and conflicting voices – with shepherds leading people in all directions.

"I am the gate," says Jesus. Follow those who will lead you to the gate. There you will find abundant life.