

The Gate: Insiders and Outsiders on the Way to Abundant Life A Sermon on John 10:1-11

What happens in your body and mind when you hear the word “gate?” I have two reactions—many gates are beautiful, spiritual, the doorway to possibilities—perhaps a Secret Garden, or Narnia, are just beyond the gate. I am immediately drawn to them. I feel invited. I want to fall silent, go deep.

At other times, perhaps when I’m feeling less spiritual, I hear the word “gate” and immediately think, “Don’t fence me in! Let me go! Or, Let me in, don’t keep me out!” And then my next thought is, “Gates mean there is a gatekeeper! You can’t keep me out, gatekeeper. Go away.” And I recognize that is a response born of privilege. Most gates are not set up to keep me, a heterosexual cis-gendered European-American person, out.

Depending on who we are, gates may make us think of invitation and safety, or exclusion and obstacles. Being shut-in or shut-out. Right now all of us who are not front-line, delivery or outdoor workers are shut-in for the most part.

Gates and their walls or fences turn all of us into Insiders or Outsiders. The sheep are Insiders—guarded and safe.

The shepherd, gatekeeper and gate are friends of the sheep; therefore they are Insiders also, although they work outside or at the threshold.

The real Outsiders are the thieves and wild animals who break in to kill or steal. The gate protects against them.

But of course the concept of Insiders/Outsiders isn’t limited to the sheep-herding world. We humans love that game, too. Every human institutions plays it, especially churches: it’s called old timers vs. newcomers. Sadly, like the rest of our society, some churches determine who is Inside and who is Outside in even worse ways: based on racism, creeds and dogma, LGBTQI -phobia, income disparities, age and style of dress.

During the 20 years before I retired, I was a professional Insider/Outsider, as most interim ministers are. We come from outside, and have an Outsider’s perspective on what works and what doesn’t work about a particular church. Yet we are also Insiders, because the church has entrusted its worship service and preaching of the Word to us, as well as visitation, pastoral care and administration. It’s a strange yet exhilarating way to be; living on the threshold in a time of strangeness and infinite possibility.

We at Sojourner's have entered that same state of disruption and possibility by beginning the interim time between called pastors. Our new Interim Pastor, Dr. Morgan, will hold up a mirror for us to see ourselves: how we worship God; how we live out our covenant as a congregation; how we relate to each other, to our pastor, and to the world around us.

In a sense, everyone in the world is living at the threshold now in the time of COVID. Life as we know it has been swiftly and shockingly changed and we wonder how we will go forward into the future. The stay at home process, in which we love our neighbor by not going out, is an already-not yet moment. We are betwixt and between.

Father Richard Rohr, Director of the Center for Action and Contemplation, just finished a week's worth of daily meditations on threshold moments, or liminal space as he calls them, and they are worth reading if you haven't. He writes that "Liminal spaces enable us to see beyond ourselves to the broader and more inclusive world that lies before us. When we embrace liminality, we choose hope over sleepwalking, denial or despair. The world around us becomes again an enchanted universe." In other words, we learn to see the Oneness of everything. We realize that we are one with each other and with the earth.

You could perhaps say that the Gospel of John is a story of Jesus in liminal space. Scholars tell us it was written for first-century Jewish Christians whose world was in chaos. The Temple had been destroyed and synagogues became the site for worship. But members of John's community were getting thrown out of the synagogue for believing that Jesus is the revelation of God. The book is filled with radical contrasts: not just insiders and outsiders, but also darkness and light, death and resurrection, blindness and sight.

The basic structure of the Gospel of John consists of a pattern of a miracle drama, followed by conflict, and then discussion and teaching with the disciples. What we have today is just part of the teaching.

Jesus' somewhat confusing sayings about sheep and shepherds and gates are all in response to what happened to a blind beggar Jesus and the disciples passed on the road earlier. Jesus stopped and mixed his spittle with some dirt, which he applied to the man's eyes, and told him to go and wash in the pool. For the very first time in his life, the man could see! Think of how long he has lived never seeing the face of his family. No longer would he need to beg for food. He has freedom and new opportunities. He will be safe within community instead of isolated alone on the street.

In Jesus' day, disabled and sick people were considered sinners. The theory was that God must have been punishing them for a reason. His healing saves him from marginalization as a sinner as well as an unemployed beggar. But because he refuses to condemn Jesus, he is thrown out of the presence of the religious authorities.

Disabled, he is an Outsider to all but Jesus. His sight restored, he is Insider to his family and community, but now Outside the good graces of the religious rulers.

Jesus said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (verses 9 and 10b)

What does abundant life mean to you? To sheep it is enough grass to eat, sunlight, air and water. Protection from predators, and a guide through the wilderness.

To the man who was healed of blindness, it is sight, independence in daily life, a sense of being a contributing member of a community, freedom from marginalization, and new opportunities.

We all want food, water and safety, don't we. In our basic needs we are no different than sheep. Jesus came that we may have, not just life. But ABUNDANT life. As human beings, we also need a community that accepts and affirms us. We want to make a meaningful contribution to the world, and know that we will be missed when we are gone.

David Lose, a pastor who works with Lutheran World Relief, suggests that this scripture invites us to live into God's promise of abundant life by joining Jesus in his mission—to bring love, medical care, clean water, food, self-determination and safety to the people of the world. How can we use this time of disruption, this liminal or threshold space, the already-not yet of COVID time, to reimagine a world in which healing of the earth is possible, and no-one has to go without water, sustenance or medical care?

It's a tall order, and I don't have any easy answers for you. Let us begin to choose hope over sleepwalking, denial or despair, like Fr. Richard says. I know that God loves us more than we dare ask or imagine. God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son to bring us healing and abundant life. Jesus calls us each by name, because we are the sheep of his pasture. Amen.