

Gated Community

Bob and I enjoy living and working in the Fairfield Circuit parsonage. Behind the house is a fenced enclosure where our companion dogs love to run and play. And on one side of this fenced enclosure is a gate.

One day, our dog Faith was in the fenced yard all by herself. She wouldn't come inside. She sat, transfixed. Her eyes focused on one particular spot. On that spot sat a bunny. Right after Easter. Hmm... That bunny was only a few yards outside the gate. Faith didn't bark. She didn't growl. She just stared. Fixated on that rabbit.

If the gate had been open, Faith would have been after that rabbit like a shot. Fortunately for that bunny, the gate was closed.

So we're grateful for both the fence *and* the gate.

Gates have various functions. An open gate offers admittance. A closed gate prevents admittance. And gates work in both directions. Gates can let whoever is inside, out. Gates can let whoever is outside, in. Gates can also keep whoever is inside, in.

And keep whoever is outside, out. In the world around us, we've gotten used to seeing various kinds of gates.

In the real estate section of a certain newspaper, a new residential development proclaims itself to be a "Private Gated Community." Its security gate excludes unwelcome visitors who might attempt to get in. Or at least, deters them from entering by way of the gate.

At Columbia Metropolitan Airport, travelers go to their assigned gate. There, they wait until their flight gets called. There, they line up at the gate through which they must pass to board the aircraft.

On the verandah of a home it was once my privilege to visit, a childproof gate across the opening at the top of an outdoor staircase prevented and protected the family's toddler from tumbling down that long flight of steps.

I share a story with you. Once upon a time at the zoo, a kangaroo kept getting out of his enclosure. Knowing that he could jump up high, the zoo officials put up a six-foot fence. Next morning, the kangaroo was out, hopping happily around the zoo. A ten-foot fence was put up. Again he got out.

Now there's something you need to know about the animals in this particular zoo: they could communicate with one another.

After a fence fifteen feet high was installed, an elephant in the next enclosure asked the kangaroo, "How high do you think they'll go with these walls?"

The kangaroo replied, "About a hundred feet, unless somebody closes the gate at night!"

How high do you think a *church's* walls should be? Are a church's walls—physical or figurative—constructed to keep its members *in*? Or erected to keep the world *out*? These questions merit careful consideration.

For the world is beloved by God. Who—according to John's Gospel—gave God's only Son because God so loved the world.

But it's a world in dire need of healing. It's a world in desperate need of transformation. Our Church's mission is making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Mission is the church's reason for being. Without mission, the church becomes just a group of like-minded people, hanging out inside its walls.

Walls that have doors. Now a door can be closed or it can be open. The United Methodist Church is a church of open doors. If

a door is open, you can go *in* through it or go *out* through it. Just like you can through a gate.

A gate is the image Jesus uses in this Sunday's gospel reading. Now you and I are used to thinking of Jesus in terms of a different metaphor. We love to envision him as a shepherd. As *our* shepherd. In many churches, stained-glass windows picture Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Which he is!

The shepherd has a relationship with the sheep. And today we hear Jesus explaining it. It's a committed relationship. An intimate relationship. But his first listeners have apparently forgotten the Hebrew Scriptures' portrayals of God as shepherd and God's people as sheep. So Jesus tries another approach. Offers a new perspective on his relationship with his sheep. Jesus says, *I am the gate*.

Now when we hear his words, we may start doing some mental gymnastics. Trying to figure out how Jesus can be both the gate *for* the sheep and shepherd *of* the sheep. Most of us don't run across sheep too often.

But the ways of sheep and shepherds are familiar to first-century people. A Near Eastern shepherd would gather sheep into the fold, then lay his own body down across the opening of the

enclosure. So that no sheep can get out without his knowing it. And no thieving stranger can get by him. He—literally—becomes the gate for the sheep.

Could this not be how Jesus sees himself in relation to his sheep? Will he not lay down his own body—his own life—for us? Is his perfect sacrifice not evoked when he says to us: “I am the gate for the sheep”?

This “I AM” statement of Jesus echoes the self-revelation and the very name of the One who speaks from a burning bush. In this Gospel, whenever Jesus says “I AM,” we hear him confirming his unity, his oneness with the One he calls Father. But Jesus’ first-century disciples don’t always catch his meaning. And we—his twenty-first century disciples—don’t always understand, either. So Jesus uses tangible images to help us grasp deep truth. He tells us, *I am the gate for the sheep*. That’s us. Sheep. A flock. A community.

My brothers and sisters, we are a community. Whose gate is Christ. We are a gated community! But we’re radically different from that *exclusive* gated community in the real estate section. Because God’s desire and intention is that we be not exclusive, but *inclusive*.

And Jesus has set us a beautiful example of inclusivity. Remember all the kinds of folk he invites and welcomes into the fold? Simple fishermen. And tax collectors. Foreigners. Second-class citizens. Like women. And little children. The blind. The lame and the leper. Members of the world's oldest profession. The poor and the outcast and the forgotten. All of those who've been shoved way out to society's very edges. These are the ones Jesus includes in his invitation to come through the gate.

But not everyone will accept the invitation. Not everyone will choose to come through the gate that is Christ. Sadly, those who choose to remain outside actually exclude *themselves*.

Just as a camel would have great difficulty passing through the eye of a needle, so too, someone with wealth, like the rich ruler in Jesus' story, may have difficulty getting through this gate. Not because *they* don't fit, but because their material possessions don't fit. And they make a deliberate choice not to enter and leave their possessions behind.

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear how the earliest believers handled wealth and possessions. They sold what they had and shared their resources. No one had too much. No one had too little. They gathered to praise God and to

break bread together. They grew in number by including people who were in the *process* of being saved. And all that they did, they did with glad hearts.

These long-ago Christians show us a picture of what abundant life looks like—life in a gated community, a community of faith with Jesus Christ as its gate. You and I are the sheep.

Sheep that can get into trouble when we wander off by ourselves. We live in a culture that prizes individuality. But on our own, we can become not only oblivious to danger, but vulnerable. Not a good combination! As Peter reminds, we have a tendency to stray. We might get entangled in briars or fall victim to a predator. We don't always do so well when we try to go it alone. Our Christian faith is not meant to be practiced in solitude. We've been designed to share a common life.

You belong to a flock. You are part of a community. You enter through the gate. And are tenderly enfolded into a refuge of grace. Into the church. Into the sheepfold.

You and I like to *stay* in the sheepfold. It's a place of shelter. A place of protection. A place of security. But you're not meant

to remain always within its walls. For you are brought out of the fold by Jesus himself.

Beloved, you are his own. Christ Jesus knows your name. He calls you by name. And you follow this One who calls you. You follow this One who has prepared a table for you today, where, in his presence, your cup overflows. You follow this One who leads you out.

This is the One who leads you out into green pastures.

This is the One who leads you into pastures of mission and ministry and service.

This is the One who leads you into pastures of life in all its fullness—the hope-filled, generous, loving life he has promised you.

This is the One who leads you into life that begins not on a far-off someday, but now. Today!

This is the One who leads you into life—abundant life in your God whose goodness and mercy will be with you, always and forever!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.