

Gatekeepers

A Sermon for Worship on Communion Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

May 7, 2017

Text: John 10:1-10

As I was doing my research for this sermon, I did something I often do which is to look up the meaning of a key word – in this case “gatekeeper” – in the dictionary. I was more than a little surprised to find no entry for “gatekeeper” in the *Webster’s Dictionary* I have on my shelf at home. But, good old Webster’s did have a definition for “gatecrasher”. A gatecrasher is someone who shows up to something without an invitation and just joins right in as though they belong there. No entry for “gatekeeper” but a precise definition for “gatecrasher.” It would seem that we want to be very precise about keeping people out of things and places and events where someone doesn’t think they belong. Presumably this would be a gatekeeper’s job but no acknowledgement of this in Webster’s. Curious.

Even more curious is that my *Westminster Dictionary of the Bible* also had no definition for “gatekeeper.” It included a definition of a gate and a description of significant gates in the Bible, but no definition or description of a gatekeeper. Now I am really starting to wonder, what’s up with this? I mean, what good is a gate without a gatekeeper? But then again, when we think

about gates, how often do we find a gatekeeper assigned to the gate in question? Not very often. In fact, when I looked on the internet for gatekeeper images to post on Facebook with my weekly description of our service here this morning, the only images which came up that had people in them were the Coldstream Guards stationed at the gates to Buckingham Palace in London. And again their purpose is to keep people out and not encourage people to come in. But no images even remotely biblical came up. Very, *very* curious! To understand what's going on here, we need to look at this text from John more carefully.

This text from John is part of a series of stories about Jesus called the "I am" stories. In John, and not in any of the other gospels by the way, John has Jesus making all kinds of statements which begin with the words, "I am." We're familiar with many of them. "I am the bread of life," "I am the true vine," and so on. Each of these "I am" sayings addresses a different aspect of Jesus that John wanted to explain more deeply in order to build the case that Jesus was and is the long awaited "Messiah." What's curious about this morning's text is that in it, and the verses immediately following it, Jesus firmly makes two "I am" statements. "I am the gate" Jesus says in verse 7 when it becomes clear his audience for this story has no clue about what he's trying to teach them. Then, in verse 11, Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," no doubt one of the best known and most familiar of all the images of Jesus. Jesus

the Good Shepherd, cradling a little lamb – sometimes a white one, sometimes a black one – with a hillside full of sheep behind him is probably the most often depicted image of Jesus beside the Crucifixion. Why? Because it's comforting! There is little doubt who the sheep are – that's us! That's everyone who listens to Jesus and follows his voice and his teachings to wherever he will lead us. Yes, of course! But, then who the heck is the gatekeeper?

Jesus has told us he is the gate and that he is the shepherd, but who is the gatekeeper mentioned in verse 3? It is not at all clear. “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him (the shepherd).” But then it's the shepherd who calls to the sheep and it is the shepherd's voice to which the sheep respond. Not only that, the sheep will not respond to any strange voice because they know it is not the shepherd, not *their* shepherd. One of the things I like about John and about this text in particular is that John doesn't mince any words in describing how the people just did not get what Jesus was trying to explain to them as simply as he possibly could. “But they did not understand what he was saying to them,” John says and we can almost imagine Jesus with his head in his hands wondering how to make this any simpler.

“I am the gate for the sheep,” he finally says. “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” I am guessing this too was met with blank stares from people who didn't know much but they knew they were not sheep.

They were people. “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” Slightly more understanding here because everyone knew that’s what bandits did. And then comes the clincher, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. No doubt this is why Jesus’s next sentence is “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Okay, now they are starting to get a glimmer. They know a shepherd does whatever it takes to keep the sheep safe whether they are out in the pasture or secured in the paddock. Jesus is saying he is the gate, the connecting point between the pasture and the paddock so that must mean he is the means to living life fully no matter what the circumstances. He is teaching them what it means to follow him – to know the difference between the truth of his teachings and the falseness of what others have been telling them and will continue telling them in order to pull them away from God. Okay, now I’m starting to get this, they think. Maybe. A little.

But, where does that leave us as we ponder this story and how it relates to our lives? Jesus is the gate for us too – showing us the way to a deeper relationship with God and each other that leads us to an abundant life. And what is this abundant life? A life lived in closer connection to God and each other. A life lived in hope, trusting in the promises of God. A life lived knowing that each of us is as precious to God as each sheep is precious to the

shepherd. A life lived in which we make the effort to know where the gate is, where Jesus is in our lives each day. A life lived knowing that we are fully and completely included and welcomed into the circle of the Beloved Community no matter who we are. A life lived with a new understanding of what it means to be loved by, saved by Jesus for a deeper, fuller life. But it's also important to realize that this deeper, fuller life is not the goal of following Jesus. A deeper, fuller life is the result, the by-product of following Jesus. Just like understanding that Jesus the Gate does not keep people out, we must also realize that living the abundant life of faith is not a goal to be striven toward. It is not about leaving something behind, like sin, intentionally. It is about living as fully as one can in deep relationship with God made possible through the actions of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and the result of that conscious action on our part is what brings us life abundant.

But, still, who or what is the gatekeeper?? If Jesus is the Gate, then why even mention the gatekeeper? It is clear from the text that the gatekeeper has some role in all of this. "The gatekeeper opens the gate for him" with him being the shepherd or Jesus. Who or what is this gatekeeper? The text doesn't say which is interesting in and of itself because Jesus goes out of his way to explain everything else about this metaphor he is using in this story. He explains the gate and the shepherd. He explains the sheep and the bandits. But not a word explaining who the

gatekeeper is. Apparently, we have to figure that one out for ourselves. I'm thinking there's only one answer but it's not an easy one. Yes, the sheep are us. That's very clear. But the sheep are us as a generic group of people lucky enough to hear the shepherd's voice which guides those who follow into the paddock for safety when it's needed and back out into pasture, into that abundant life that comes from following the shepherd and the shepherd's instructions. That's very different, being part of the flock or the herd, than to be face to face with the decision to respond to that invitation from Jesus to let him into *your* life. As a part of the crowd, you just follow along with what everyone else is doing. You just do what other people have decided is the right thing to do. You follow, yes, but for the wrong reason. You follow because everyone else is doing it. No thought. No real commitment. No displacement of all those things that pull your attention and your life away from living an abundant life in God, those bandits calling to you from the sidelines, trying to trick you into following false hopes and possibilities.

If you are a sheep you are just one of the crowd, going where everyone else goes. You are one of many, hoping to remain anonymous in the flock, able to do what you want to do, when you want to do it without too much attention paid to what Jesus might think of what you're doing. BUT what if you are the gatekeeper – the individual, singular gatekeeper who has to open the gate to

allow the shepherd in to your life? Now that is something else entirely. The gatekeeper has to look directly at Jesus who is the gate in order to open the gate for Jesus. The gatekeeper has to look Jesus who is the good shepherd right in the eyes as the shepherd comes to the gate. The gatekeeper, dear friends, is you and me, one on one with Jesus. And that is an unnerving thing to think about.

One on one with Jesus! Yikes! What does he see when he looks at me? What does he think of me and the choices I make? What does he think about the other people and things and situations I open my gate for? What does he think about who I let in to my life and who I keep out, and why? What does he think about how I spend my time and my money? Oh my, that is something to ponder! But, dear friends, as difficult as this may be, there is just no escaping this gatekeeper identity for us. In our lives each day – with the people and situations we encounter – every time life presents us with a challenge or a celebration, we are deciding to open the gate to let Jesus into that situation right along with us, into that encounter with life whatever it is, into that moment of despair and fear, into that moment of joy, jubilation and thanksgiving. Every moment of every day we are the gatekeepers of our relationship with God. Will we let God in, or not? If yes, then how much? If yes, then are we willing to let this gate-opening moment change our lives as individuals? As a

church? Who else might we invite to approach the gate, this gate that leads to abundant life in Jesus? Are we willing to be that gatekeeper who calls out to the people passing by to come see what's happening inside the doors, the gates, of this church? Will we just be sheep who follow or gatekeepers who include?

How much are we willing to be transformed by what we find when we open the gate and let Jesus into our lives and into our hearts? That is the real question this story from John's Gospel places before us. We are the sheep, yes. But much more to the point, we are the gate – each one of us, individually. And as the gatekeeper we either say yes and open the gate to life abundant in Jesus or we say no and keep the gate of our hearts closed and latched. Dear friends, it is not possible to open a gate part-way. It's either open or it isn't. You as the gatekeeper of your life and your heart are either open to the abundant life promised by Jesus, or you're not. Make no mistake that accepting the gift and challenge of this abundant life Jesus offers, that wondrous, surprising and demanding life, changes everything for you.

Dear friends, you are the gatekeeper of your life. Choosing to open that gate to the abundant life possible as a follower of Jesus is yours alone. And, know that if you choose to open that gate to Jesus, something *will* happen. Just what will be up to you ... and Jesus of course. Amen.