

Who/What Is Your "Gate" to the Divine?

John 10:1-10 Ezekiel; 34:11-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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You've heard the term, "preaching to the choir." That's a message for which everyone already basically agrees. This particular sermon, however, is a bit more targeted, primarily to those of you who struggle with wanting to self-identify as a Christian.

On Easter Sunday, three weeks ago, I stated in the sermon that we should do all we can, as individuals and as a congregation, to help dismantle what Jesus Seminar fellow Marcus Borg calls the "institutional monopoly on access to God." In other words, **I see as part of our responsibility as followers of Jesus to call organized religion to task for constantly coming up with litmus tests to decide if what a person believes qualifies them (in their opinion) as a Christian, and therefore to full access to the love, grace, mercy and redemption of God.**

For instance, unlike some who consider themselves as gatekeepers to determine who is or isn't a Christian, I take a much more inclusive approach. For many in our day and age, that means interpreting certain stories in the Bible metaphorically rather than literally, including the stories of Jesus' resurrection. Yet, opening ourselves to a less-concrete definition of what it means to self-identify as a Christian can get kind of confusing, especially when a person no longer believes what they were taught to believe as children, or basically forced to believe in much more traditional or conservative congregations.

I know for a fact that many of you here at College Hill are somewhat reluctant to identify yourself as a Christian, mainly because a large portion of the general population, especially the younger generations, now associate Christianity with being narrow-minded, judgmental, and even hypocritical. Plus, **many of us no longer fit nicely into what tradition dictates we must believe in order to identify ourselves as Christians.** So here in the buckle of Bible Belt, the term "Christian" has taken on a connotation of which many of you, including myself, do not really want to be associated.

Throughout many of my sermons over the several years, however, I have tried to **reclaim that term, "Christian," so that indeed we can proudly call ourselves a Christian, yet with integrity to our own understandings of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.**

I have stated in the past something to the extent of: I still call myself a Christian because **I believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the definitive revelation of the nature and character of God.** If I thought that Mohammad was, then I would be Muslim. If I thought Buddha was, then I would be Buddhist. The twist that progressive Christianity puts on all this is that **we now question what church tradition tells us we must believe about who Jesus is. I personally do not believe, for example, that Jesus is the only revelation of the**

nature and character of God. I think such exclusive claims are based more in the desire for authoritarian power and control on the part of organized religion, whether it recognizes this or not.

So for me, it comes down to this question that we should each ask of ourselves. **What do you believe about the nature and character of that which we call God, the Divine, the Ground of All Being? If your understanding of God is *primarily* derived from the life, ministry, and teachings of Jesus, then do not be ashamed to call yourself a Christian.**

Some would argue, like the late Dr. Harold Hill, that a better term for that is a "Jesusite," since that better describes a follower of Jesus than the current understanding of the term "Christian."

I went on to state in my Easter sermon: "None of this means, however, that there aren't certain paths and understandings that lead to living life more fully, to loving more abundantly, and being who God has created us to be." And that brings us beautifully into today's Gospel reading from John 10, in particular with the statement that the author puts on the lips of Jesus, "I am the gate for the sheep." This passage needs a bit of unpacking, however, before we get around to understanding how Jesus acts as a gate - a particular path if you will - to the Divine.

There is a quite a mix of images in the first 3 verses of John 10. The *gate* is put forward as the proper entrance to the sheepfold, the place where the sheep gather for safety. The *shepherd* enters by the gate where the sheep already are. He calls each sheep by name and they know his voice. Later, he will lead them out. At the gate is a *gatekeeper* who opens the gate for the shepherd.

So which image or metaphor does Jesus (or rather, the gospel writer) mean for us to best understand Jesus' role: the gate? the gatekeeper? or the shepherd? Most of us would probably guess the shepherd. After all, in verse 11, the verse that immediately follows today's reading, the text states, "I am the good shepherd." We are all very familiar with the image of shepherd as it applies to God in the Old Testament. Like Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." Or, as we heard in today's Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 34, "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out...I will feed them with good pasture... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." It is this very familiar shepherd image and metaphor for God that the New Testament biblical authors, especially the author of John, also ascribed to Jesus.

Whoever, in their wisdom, delineated the assigned lectionary Gospel readings for each Sunday were well aware of our wanting to jump straight into this familiar image of Jesus as the good shepherd. That's why they stopped today's reading one verse short of that declaration. In their wisdom, they are all but forcing us to explore and investigate an image that we rarely discuss to describe Jesus - Jesus as the gate.

The image of a gate can be somewhat problematic, however, for those claiming to be inclusive. A gate brings to mind something that separates those on the inside from those on the outside, for purposes of protection or privilege. For the past 2000 years this has been one of the interpretations of the image of Jesus as the gate - that the only way to God the Father is by believing in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, and the only begotten Son of God, God in the flesh.

I do not doubt for a moment that for the gospel writer (for John's community of faith) those who entered by the gate that was Christ necessarily had to close the gate on the flock that remained in the synagogue. During the infancy of Christianity, questions of exclusion and inclusion raged on both sides: who was in and who was out theologically, morally, ethnically? It's disturbing that those questions still rage. But these days they are found primarily within the halls of Christianity itself.

I find it remarkable helpful, however, for each of us to spend some time thinking about Jesus as a gate to our own theological wanderings. **Speaking personally, Jesus is for me the gate through which God is most fully known. Again, this is why I call myself a Christian.**

Some of you may be aware of an organization that used to be called *The Center for Progressive Christianity*. They have recently shorted that to simply *ProgressiveChristianity.org*. Over the years they have revised a document entitled, "**The 8 Points of Progressive Christianity.**" Those of you who are new members can find it in the book of information that I gave you when you joined. It begins, "**By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...**" and Point #1 is this: "**Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.**"

Notice that it inclusively states, "*an* approach to God," rather than the exclusive, "*the* approach to God." This is one of the most divisive debates within Christianity today. **Is Jesus the ONLY way to God and eternal life?** While the Presbyterian Church (USA) officially states as a denomination that Jesus is the *only* way, **there is a large and growing percentage of pastors and congregants that see Jesus simply as *their* way to God, but not necessarily the one and only way.**

I'm not afraid to admit that I fit into this category, and I would suspect that many of you do as well. For us, we can claim Point #2 of *The 8 Points of Progressive Christianity*, in that we, "Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us."

You may be wondering, however, if there are any 'benefits' in following Jesus as our shepherd, and understanding him as our gate to a fuller understanding of God? While there is a myriad of answers to that question, there's one right there in verse 10, and it is **perhaps the best proclamation of the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."** So let me close by asking:

- Are you experiencing *abundant* life?
- Are we, as a church, living our congregational life to it's fullest?
- Could we experience our life together more abundantly?
- If so, how?

These are the questions that this image of **Jesus as the gate** asks us to reflect upon, and then for which we must respond.

Who or what is your 'gate' to the Divine?

Amen.