

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Jesus said to the Pharisees, “I am the gate.” It’s not an error in translation which we should interpret as Jesus being a gate keeper. Instead, this sentence is the key to understanding today’s gospel. Jesus as the gate in John’s gospel is similar to what brought comfort to the Psalmist in Psalm 23, namely the rod and the staff. Back in Psalm 23, the rod is the thing the shepherds use to fend off threats and the staff is the longer stick with the hook at the end that can help redirect sheep or rescue them from, say, a ditch. The hook helps to bring sheep back into the community of the fold. So too, in John, the gate is a protection mechanism for the sheep by limiting or slowing outside threats while also giving access to pastures so as to be “saved.” Or, to translate “saved” in another way from the original Greek, the gate gives access to the pastures so that the sheep can be healed, made whole, or restored. You see, the gate, which in this metaphor is Jesus, is what protected and granted access to wholeness and healing.

And in Jesus’s time, access was a big deal. After all, unless you were Jewish then entry to the temple was not available. If you weren’t a Roman citizen, you had no rights. If you weren’t a male, your perspective was not trusted. So too, in our time, we see this reality every single day.

You see, for most of us COVID-19 has been jarring. It has felt like an uncontrollable and uncertain change of events. And, it is. What makes it even more difficult is that we in the western world have for so long lived in a fantasy. A fairytale that is neither Biblical nor Christian. A belief system that has tricked us into believing that we are able to control and manage every aspect of our lives. So, now, when we find ourselves in this unpredictable, uncontrollable state, we wonder why has God all of the sudden let this happen. Yet, the truth is that the situation we are in is not all that new from a global perspective, but now, it is a bit closer to home.

When I was living in India, there were signs throughout the country reminding people not to spit and to cover their mouths when they sneezed. These signs were not just trying to control another's actions, but rather, these signs were a necessary action needed to protect life by preventing the spread of Tuberculosis (or simply TB). For, according to the World Health Organization, TB is the leading cause of death from a single infectious agent in the world.¹ Yet, in our privileged society in the United States we don't think much about it. And we haven't had to think about a lot of epidemics like Ebola, SARS, TB, and many others. Now, when find ourselves living the reality that so many people face every single day, it does feel jarring. And, it also exposes to us what has always been true—access matters. Access to healthy food and water matters. Access to education matters. Access to parks and playgrounds matter. Access to quality healthcare matters. And what we find during COVID-19 is that our ethnic and

¹ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/tuberculosis>

racial minorities have always taken the brunt of the burden.^{2, 3} And this will always be the case while we are unworried about food deserts in the city. It will always be the case for as long as we deem essential workers as disposable. It will always be the case while racial and ethnic minorities are over-represented in jails, prisons, and detention centers.⁴ This will always be the case for as long as we close the gate, as long as we bar access, as long as we act so un-Christ like.

You see, in today's gospel the act of barring access is so not like Jesus. For, Jesus is clear that he came to bring abundant life. Jesus came to open the gate and welcome all those who want to live collectively like sheep. Jesus came to show us acts of loving generosity are the hallmark of Jesus's followers. Jesus came to reveal that God's nature is rooted in self-giving love. Jesus came to show us what it looks like to live a life focused on abundance.

Friends, we have a God that desires nothing more than abundant life for you and for all creation. A life shaped by grace and love. A life that is filled with giving and growing. So, yes, the world in which we live is disrupted. But in that disruption, we have the opportunity to see what we could not see otherwise. And that's not to say that God caused COVID-19, because that's not the nature of God, but rather, that's to say that sometimes God can be seen in the unfortunate and the uncertain. That God can open

² <https://www.chicagoreporter.com/flatten-whose-curve-covid-19-response-overlooks-built-in-racial-inequities/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/06/828303894/in-chicago-covid-19-is-hitting-the-black-community-hard>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/racial-ethnic-minorities.html>

our eyes to see the ways we've devalued delivery workers and grocery store clerks, so that we might speak up and demand better pay and working conditions. That God might open our eyes to the medical personnel and government employees that work every day to care for us but only get thanks when the coronavirus arrives.

So in this time, might we see Jesus, our gate, our protector, and our divine access give us some direction to abundant life? Might we seek to create a space that looks a lot like the first reading from Acts. A place where we might commit to finding the shepherd's voice in the Scriptures with each another. A place where we might be committed to sharing our meal and sharing in this holy meal of Communion. A place where we might begin to loosen our grip on the false notion that we are individuals, and instead, begin to hold what we have in common and give to those in need. For these are the hallmarks of our pursuit towards salvation.

In this odd time, may we reimagine what church, the world, and our lives might look like. May we seek the abundant life that our God freely gives. May we notice that God is always present loving and supporting us as the good shepherd. May we journey together and see God's resurrection among us. Amen.