

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Earlier this year, my parents went on a trip to Ireland and they would regularly send photos back of all their adventures. And you'd think that most of the photos would have been of old castles, or beautiful cliffs, or maybe them enjoying some Guinness at the pub. But instead, I got dozens of photos of sheep.

And you might be wondering "why in the world would they send so many photos of sheep?" Great question, I also wondered. But then I started realizing that every sheep had some sort of pattern painted on it. A green stripe by their tail, or a red dot on their upper back. And when I looked it up, I discovered that apparently in Ireland, sheep from different farms often graze together, so farmers mark their sheep so that they know which flock the sheep belong to. It's practical, a tradition rooted in responsibility, in making sure that each sheep is accounted for and can be taken care of.

But imagine for a moment that someone came along and said, "Oh, only the sheep with green stripes are saved! Only they should get to graze in this pasture and be in community together. The ones with the red dots? They don't belong, and they shouldn't be here!"

That wouldn't make any sense right? It wouldn't make sense that something designed to be about care and responsibility got twisted into a system that justifies exclusion. And yet that's essentially how this passage has been

interpreted over time. If you see photos of ancient stone sheepfolds, you'll notice that there's usually a gap in the entrance, through which the sheep would enter and exit. At night, shepherds would literally lay their body across this gap, acting as a gate, risking their very lives to keep their sheep safe through the night. The image of Jesus as a gate was meant to be an image of profound comfort and safety, and yet instead it has been weaponized, mutating into an image of Jesus as a gatekeeper, as someone who draws lines between Christians and non-Christians, saved and not saved.

The way this passage's original meaning has been twisted beyond recognition reminds me so much of the passages we've been studying in our Third Sunday Teaching series this year, passages that have been warped beyond recognition to justify horrible oppression and bigotry. And of course, just like with all the historically harmful passages we've studied, an interpretation of our Gospel today that justifies exclusion profoundly misses the true point of this text.

And so those of you who have come to our Third Sunday Teaching sessions know what we must do next, right?

This isn't a test, don't worry, I'll tell you. We have to look at the context of the passage. Because Jesus doesn't just start talking about shepherds and gates out of nowhere.

No, just before this moment, Jesus has healed the man born blind. We heard the man's story a couple of weeks before Easter—he had spent his entire life pushed to the margins of society, forced to beg for food because of his

disability. And even after Jesus heals him, even after the man born blind has a body that conforms to society's expectations, the religious leaders—the very ones who are supposed to be shepherding the people—still refuse to see his humanity. Jesus' healing presents a threat to their power, and so they do what power often does—they double down. They expel the man born blind from the community. They create a boundary—or a gate, if you will—that makes it obvious who is in and who is out.

We, too, are living in a moment where that same type of boundary-making is happening all around us. We too, have leaders who spend their time suppressing anything they deem a threat to their power instead of caring for the vulnerable. We have heard leaders complain that empathy is a toxic emotion Christians need not worry about. We, too, see religious beliefs and Scripture twisted to justify exclusion.

And it's in response to a moment like this—in response to failed leadership and exclusion that is justified by religious belief—that Jesus begins to speak about shepherds and sheep, about gates and thieves.

...Okay, so now we have the context for our passage. If we were in one of our Third Sunday Teaching sessions now, this would be the time we'd say, "Okay, we know now that the harmful interpretation is wrong... but then, what does it mean?"

With this wider context, we can see that when Jesus says "I am the gate," he is not creating a system of exclusion, where some are allowed in and others aren't. No, he's responding to a system that already excludes—a system

where leaders who are supposed to be shepherding a community are instead acting like thieves and bandits, stealing away wholeness and welcome. When Jesus says “I am the gate,” he’s not drawing lines between who is eternally saved and who isn’t. No, he’s exposing the leaders who have already decided who gets to live in community and who is left to suffer outside of it, here and now.

And in Jesus’ typical radical fashion, he doesn’t respond to the violence of the world’s gatekeeping by building a stronger gate. No, instead he responds by becoming the gate. When Jesus says “I am the gate,” he’s saying “I love you so much that I would lay down my very life to make sure you’re safe and protected and beloved.” When Jesus says “I am the gate,” he’s saying “There is nowhere you can go that will stop me from finding you and welcoming you.” Jesus didn’t just let the man born blind stay cast out of society, alone. Instead, Jesus sought him out and treated him with dignity. Instead, Jesus invited him into community, ensuring that he would never again have to beg for food to survive. Instead, Jesus issued the promise that comes at the end of our Gospel today, saying “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

We get a glimpse into what this abundant life looks like in our reading from Acts. We read about the early church, about a community of people who were fiercely devoted to one other. A community of people that saved each other by ensuring that each and every person had enough food and resources to survive. A community of people founded on the conviction that with Christ as the gate, there is always enough belonging and abundance for all.

This is the meaning of our Gospel passage: that Christ replaces the gates of our world, and instead issues an open invitation into abundance for all. And so the question for us today becomes: with Christ as our gate, what kind of community are we called to be?

This question is more important than ever because we are living in a moment where the very foundations of Christianity are being twisted, where Christianity is being used not as a source of abundant life but as a gate to decide who is “in” and who is “out,” who belongs in this country and who doesn’t, who is deemed worthy of care and who gets pushed aside. But our Gospel today shows us that we are not called to hand the gate over to thieves and bandits. Instead, we are called to follow a Christ who becomes the gate and in doing so invites us to be a community where our faith is defined not by how well we draw lines but how fully we embody love. To be a community that practices inclusion each and every Third Sunday Teaching session, each and every time we show up to San Timoteo, each and every time we make meals for Night Ministry, each and every time we boldly claim that this is a church where all are truly welcome and beloved. To be a community who in response to Christian nationalism has the courage to say “that is not the voice of our shepherd.”

Because we know what the voice of our shepherd sounds like. Our shepherd reaches across the millennia to us today and says “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

So in the end, those painted stripes and dots on the sheep were never about exclusion—they were about making sure that each sheep was known and

cared for and protected. That is what Christ does for us in this passage. He reminds us that even amidst all our differences, each and every one of us is known and beloved and called—to step through the gate and into building a community that declares there is enough room for all. **Amen.**