

Bless and Beware the Gatekeepers

The Fourth Sunday in Easter

May 7, 2017

I read and hear today's gospel with both great joy on one hand and a bundle of unhappy emotions on the other: regret, disappointment, indignation, anger.

Today we have our coming to Christ and faith explored by two metaphors.

First is Jesus as shepherd. "I am the shepherd." But the Pharisees don't get the metaphor: "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand him." So he offers another, arguably even more difficult: "I am the gate for the sheep." It is the metaphor of Jesus as the Gate that is on my mind this morning.

- Metaphors are where the brain and the heart of faith meet. And for better or worse, they are often the battlegrounds of faith.
- So let us consider Jesus as the Gate. For example, is Jesus the Gate open or closed?

I much prefer Jesus the Open Gate: "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Arguably, though, there is Jesus the Closed Gate as well: "Anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a

bandit.” I know, the metaphor doesn’t exactly say that the gate is closed: the thieves and bandits may have ignored the Open Gate and climbed over the fence for their own thieving reasons. But historically the Church has had a strong tendency to think of itself as a closed community of the righteous.

Often the results have been ugly. All churches shelter some of those who have bumped into closed gates and been bruised by them. They have heard it said, silently or aloud, “*You are not one of us.*” They have been bruised trying to get in, *and* in trying to get out.

- There are gatekeepers who specialize in closing gates and guarding them.

One result is that churches more often than we think are visited by wary people wounded in one way or another by their encounters with churches and Christianity—they are looking hopefully for an open gate.

A while back Peter W. Marty wrote this in *Christian Century*: “At the top of the wound list, injuring the faith and spirit of many innocent believers, is an encounter with what I call ‘arrogant certainty.’ When Christian people convert their spiritual confidence into theological certainty and then apply that certainty to their account of God, faith becomes ideological. Humility all but vanishes. Innocent people end up being damaged or dismissed by the arrogance.” Such people talk from their own sheepfold, and its gate is firmly closed.

“There is something about certainty that makes Christianity very unchristian,” the wonderful Christian novelist Marilynne Robinson has written, and she is right.

Simone Weil, the profound and difficult French mystic, according to author and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, had an “almost overwhelming” desire to be baptized. Weil nonetheless refused baptism, Taylor writes, “saying that she could not seek her own soul’s safety in any church that denied salvation to those who did not belong to it.”

There you seem to have the stark choice between the end points of different kinds of Christian experience and Christian teaching: the wounded on the one hand, and the separated on the other.

In the history of the church, Closed Gate thinking had led to supersessionism and triumphalism. Supersessionism is the belief among more fundamentalist Christians that hold not just that Judaism has been supplanted by Christianity, but that the covenant between God and Israel as His chosen people has been abrogated. Triumphalism goes even further, holding that a particular religion is superior and reigns triumphant over the world. Christianity has a long history of asserting this, although much less often and less confidently in the twentieth- and twenty-first century.

Pope Francis himself has preached against triumphalism.

“Triumphalism,” the Pope has asserted, “is not of the Lord. The Lord came to Earth humbly; he lived his life for 30 years; he grew up like a normal child; he experienced the trial of work and the trial of the Cross. Then, in the end, he resurrected.”

“[May] the Lord save us from fantasies of triumphalism,” he concluded. “The daily journey in the presence of God, this is the way of the Lord.”

Listen to the Jesus of the Open Gate one more time: “Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

“I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

May the gates of our hearts—and the gates of our lives—always stay open to God’s abundant life.