

“I am the Gate ”  
John 10:1-10

My spouse is a kind of mini-rancher or farmer. She regularly receives agricultural catalogues in the mail. I look at them when I occasionally eat alone. Recently a catalogue for fencing, of all things, intrigued me. I learned there is deer fencing to keep deer off of your putting green, if you have one. There is chain-link fencing, and wooden plank privacy fencing, wrought-iron fencing, and many more types. Of course, where there are fences there are gates, stairwell gates, home security gates, child safety gates, and gates to protect swimming pools.

Recently I discovered that fencing has many laws written for clarity in the legal disputes about property and livestock. For example, “Wyoming was considered an open range state. Today, the Wyoming livestock industry is the state’s second largest industry” (<http://wlsb.state.wy.us/LE/fencelaw.htm>). The website further explains the origin of legislation about fencing in Wyoming.”

Since Jesus’ time, fences and walls have been topics of great land use interest. Out West, people even today ask the question: “Are you fencing in or fencing out?” I suppose this means that animal owners are either keeping their livestock together and protected within the boundaries of a fence, or they are protecting the livestock from outside predators like coyotes, wolves, and mountain lions.

Fences in this respect are self-evidently good things; but what about fences and walls and other barriers between people? What if the people on one side of the barrier are for us like a “thief and a bandit” (v. 1)?

What is Jesus trying to tell us by saying that “I am the gate for the sheep?”

If we carefully read this lesson, we see that it is an extension of John 9, the story of the man blind from birth. If so, then Jesus is still indirectly addressing the “blind” Pharisees.

On occasion the artificial divisions of the biblical text into chapters and verses can work against our understanding of the overall narrative context of the Gospel. It is most important for us to see the idea of the good shepherd who enters into the sheepfold by the gate as the same one who gave sight to the blind man.

Ironically, as the Pharisees try to protect the integrity of the Jewish faith by their inquiries into the blind man's circumstances, the Gospel of John divides people into those who belong to the sheepfold (and thus to Jesus) and those who climb "in by another way" (v. 1).

When Jesus speaks of the gate, he also implies the fence metaphor (a gate without a fence or wall or other barrier would be pretty absurd). We see fences all around us.

In his poem, *Mending Wall*, Robert Frost tells readers that "Good fences make good neighbors." Many have speculated about his meaning, but for our purposes we can certainly see fences or other barriers as lines of differentiation between people or as ways that define us.

Some people suggest we should obliterate these divisions, but at times they are necessary for us to identify ourselves. An entrance, entryway, or portal into something protected or privileged concerns Jesus in today's lesson. The one who duly enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.

Next week we will explore more fully the image of Jesus as the good shepherd, but for now we note that the shepherd is the rightful leader of the sheep or the people.

Today's lesson reminds us that sheep sometimes need protection from thieves and bandits. One way to know the legitimate shepherd is not only because the sheep know his voice but also "he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (v. 3).

In the second half of the text Jesus also talks about those who are saved as those who enter the sheepfold through him, the Messiah. Jesus comes to offer abundant life, and this surely is a gift of God.

How does the gate of the sheepfold work? It is simply the portal through which the legitimate leader of the sheep enters and through which the sheep exit when they go out to pasture each day. As an enclosed space, the sheepfold offers protection and safety.

Could the church be like the sheepfold? We must take care not to carry John's imagery too far, yet this designation of the church is a possibility. The church is led by Jesus and the Spirit, but it is not a place of coercion or force. Rather it is a place where we may abide in peace and from which we may receive "life, and have it abundantly" (v. 10).

Jesus said once, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). When Jesus bids us come to him it is always by way of a gracious invitation. God in Christ goes no further with us than to invite us into the sheepfold where Jesus is the good shepherd. Alleluia. Amen