

Sermon 4 Easter Year A
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 St. John's Episcopal Church
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Walking Through Walls

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of him, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers. Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not know what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to hem. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10:1-10

In a mere ten verses of Scripture, we are given two striking metaphors for the way Christ relates to us and to our world: First Jesus says, "I am the gate," through which we can walk and find salvation." And, "I am the shepherd," who calls us by name.

To begin, let's remember what it means to speak in metaphors. The word itself stems from Greek, meaning "to carry something across," or "to transfer." A metaphor is a word or phrase used to describe something by comparing to an essential quality of something else, to see something or, in Jesus' case, *someone* in light of those essential qualities. Even those who read the Bible as the unerring, literal truth of God understand the biblical use of metaphors. Jesus isn't, in actuality, a gate or a shepherd, or light, or bread, or any of the metaphors the gospels writers use to describe him. But when we look at him in light of the essential qualities of those things, we gain greater insight into his nature and his presence. One way to understand where the biblical literalists and other Christians part company is in the extent of our understanding of biblical metaphor. Some Christians, and I include myself here, see the Bible *primarily* in metaphorical terms—we approach the texts almost exclusively in the search for the meaning behind the words. It's not that we're not interested in history and the things that actually happened, but we're far more interested in what the biblical stories and teachings *mean*. What truths do they point us to? What mysteries can they help us approach?

To think of Jesus as a gate, metaphorically speaking, we must presuppose the existence of a fence or wall, something that separates and divides. For a gate serves as an opening, a passageway from one reality to another. We move through gates. So Christ comes, using this metaphor, as a gate—an opening and passageway through whatever would separate us from one another and from our true selves.

Walls and fences serve an important function: they protect us from danger. We understandably fear what might happen to us should we venture past the safety of our walls or allow the unfamiliar in. Some of the walls we build are physical; some are relational; others are internal, deep within our psyches. It's important to remember, however, that we are not born with walls. We come into the world behind whatever walls our families and culture have constructed, and we must be taught to abide them. Some of

those walls, perhaps most, are essential for our safety and survival—the ones that keep us clothed and housed against the elements and protected from forces that would do us harm. Others walls, however, are rooted in fear and prejudice and cause more damage in themselves than anything we might face on the other side of them.

In the otherwise upbeat World War II Rogers and Hammerstein musical, *South Pacific*, that didn't exactly move gender relations forward with such classics as "There Ain't Nothing Like a Dame," and "I'm Gonna Wash that Man Right Outta My Hair," there was one courageous song that challenged the racial prejudices of our country long before we were ready to collectively address them:

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear...
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear,.
You've got to be carefully taught...
to be afraid of people's whose eyes are oddly made
and of those whose skin is a different shade.
You've got to be carefully taught...
before it's too late, before you are six, or seven, or eight,
to hate all the people your relatives hate.
You've got to be carefully taught.*

The outcry against this song was immediate and fierce, particularly in Southern states, where in response to the touring version of *South Pacific*, some legislators called for outlawing entertainment containing "an underlying philosophy inspired by Moscow and contrary to the American way of life." Rogers and Hammerstein were pressured to remove the song, but they remained adamant in keeping it in, willing to risk the entire enterprise for its sake.

When Jesus offers himself to us as a gate, these are the kind of walls he'd like us to walk through—the ones that divide us in destructive ways, that create unspeakable hardship for some while others remain oblivious, that allow us to live in silos of isolation and ignorance. Of course the best thing would be to tear the walls down completely. But Jesus doesn't come as a sledge hammer. He comes as a gate, a passageway, a place of meeting—inviting us to cross over into terrain we fear and learn to engage those who are different from us. For without the gates of passage and the relationships that are possible through them, suspicion builds. When we don't see other people face to face, they develop, as one person said recently, "mythical horns" in our minds and become, over time, less human to us. From behind our walls, it becomes easier for us to blame them for things that aren't their fault and see them only through the lens of what they represent to us, rather than the full and complicated human beings that they are, just like us, on our side of the wall.

There are other walls, too, not simply on the outside, but inside us as well. Again, we aren't born with walls. Infants and young children have no such protection, no sense of separation between them and the outside world. Part of the task of creating a healthy ego—a sense of "I"—involves building a wall of separation between us and others, so that we learn, over time, where we end and another person begins, and establish our own core identity. This is good and essential wall building.

Yet there is another kind of internal wall that, while initially self protective, becomes harmful to us over time. It's the wall we learn to hide behind, whenever we realize that it's not safe to be real, to let others know who we are. The Quaker educator and author, Parker Palmer, was in the Twin Cities this week and he reminded those of us fortunate to hear him speak that this internal wall of separation can cost us dearly. We risk getting lost behind our walls. Quoting Thomas Merton, Palmer observed that "Most people live lives of self impersonation," never showing up in this world as themselves.

It's a risky thing to do, to be ourselves in the world, to let ourselves be known, and to allow others to do the same. For that kind of connection to happen, we need to create what Palmer calls "circles of trust," places where we can learn the hard work of listening without fixing or judgment, of speaking our truth without foisting it on others, of allowing space for our true selves to emerge. If there is a gate of Christ within us, that's where it would lead us to, a sacred space of trust. In that space, we have hard internal work to do, *soul* work that involves learning how to take responsibility our own life and destiny, to face what Palmer calls "the demon of jealousy" that causes to fear that another's success will mean less goodness in the world for us, and to learn forgiveness, of others and oneself.

In comparison to the destructive walls of racism, global poverty, and other injustices, paying attention to our inner walls and learning how to move beyond them may seem self indulgent, navel gazing at its worst. But Parker Palmer's message to us, which rings true for me, is that it is at least as important to tend to the inner work of authenticity and selfhood as to the external forces around us. For when we live internally divided lives, we are in danger of wreaking havoc on ourselves and others in ways large and small. The self sabotage of our most powerful leaders is but one example of this danger, people at the height of their powers to do good in the world who self destruct before our eyes. Another example, perhaps closer to all of us, is what Palmer identifies as one of the great dangers in American culture today: "the rise of the empty self."

The empty self is one, in Palmer's words, "bereft of inner authority." When we are unable to locate within ourselves any North Star to guide us, we must import our sense of meaning from elsewhere. That makes us easy prey to all forces in our culture—and there are many—that promise to fill our inner emptiness for us, be it, as a friend said to me yesterday, the latest Crate and Barrel catalog, the numbing distractions of technology and mass media, or the simply the attraction of a charismatic person whose self we wish we could take on as our own. The hard work of the soul is in the cultivation of an inner life, an inner authority, a sense of Palmer called "one's own weight and substance," to offer the world. People with inner substance cultivate resilience and perseverance to speak their truth in love, persist in relationships, and work to change what must be changed in whatever spheres of influence they have.

In this inner work of moving past walls of fear and insecurity toward acceptance, inner authority and forgiveness, as in the outer work of moving past the walls of prejudice, anger, and isolation that divide us one from another, Jesus offers himself as a gate—a means of passage, a place of meeting, the one to move us beyond our self-protective posturing. He doesn't ask us to tear down our walls, but rather, with his help, to allow movement through them. "I am," he says elsewhere in the Gospel of John, using another metaphor, "the Way."

What we need to look for and be open to, it seems to me, are the unexpected options, the unforeseen possibilities that occasionally cross our paths. In them may lie the kernel of grace that can move us forward without necessarily having to dismantle everything we've built up over a lifetime to protect ourselves. Dag Hammarskold, the Swedish Secretary General to the United Nations in the 1950s, was known for his ability to mediate between highly polarized and conflicted nations and groups within nations. He had a saying, "There is always a third way." Whenever we are stuck in all or nothing extremes, there may be another option, something we don't as yet see, that can move us forward. "I am the gate."

Jesus also refers to himself, moving onto the second metaphor, as the shepherd who calls us by name and whom we follow because we recognize his voice. I've always had trouble with this one, for I never think of myself or any of you as sheep, and it is painfully obvious to me that hearing and recognizing God's voice is not easy. Yet it's worth pondering: how do we hear God's voice? How do we recognize the in multitude of voices within and around us that which speaks to us of the divine?

Recognizing the need for caution and humility here, given how easily we afford too much or too little authority to the voices both within and without, I do believe that God speaks. God speaks, from within, in the still, small voice, to borrow Elijah's language, and without, as St. Patrick said, "through mouth of friend and stranger." The problem, of course, is that there are many voices, loud and soft, voices that conflict or agree, affirm and challenge, rise up in confusion or blend in harmony.

There will always be great mystery, the paradox of tremendous effort and sheer grace associated with discerning the voice of God in our lives. Occasionally, God speaks with undeniable clarity, through flashes of insight within or through the voice of another. These moments are rare. More often than not, when seeking to hear God's voice, we are left, as with all important things, to consider multiple voices and consider the perspectives they bring. From there we reach our imperfect conclusions.

Yet I believe that Christ speaks to us as much or more in the multitude of voices as he seems to when we hear one voice clearly. We are especially close to God when we acknowledge all the voices within and around and remember that with God, there is always a third way, a way of trust that in the midst of all that we hear understand, something of the divine will filter through. For there is something of God's voice, when we hear it, that *rings true*, even when it surprises us or makes us uncomfortable. It's that *ringing trueness* that we strive to hear—the voice of God that connects us to our own voice and strengthens it, and give us the spaciousness to allow other voices their due. If we can pay attention to the options that unexpectedly present themselves and listen to the many voices around and within us for that which rings true, we stand a good chance of finding the gateway toward our true selves and our place in the world, and hearing the voice of the One who comes to show us the way.