

Gate
May 15, 2011
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We used to walk there all the time. One of my sisters must have showed me the way; or maybe our Aunt. It was a little winding dirt road that bent off from another winding dirt road that was off of Boulder Lane. Boulder Lane was (as you may have guessed) *yet another* dirt road. Boulder Lane also leads directly to the Allen family camp where we spend summer vacations. Since I was “knee high to a grasshopper” I have wandered around on all the dirt roads that wind and bend all around Newark Pond, which our family camp overlooks in all its rustic glory.

And this particular dirt road off of the dirt road off of Boulder Lane was my favorite place to walk. Down *that* road, at the right time of year, there were special treats waiting. Down *that* road is where the wild blueberries grow. Huge bushes towered over children’s heads, heavy laden with ripe fruit—sweet summertime goodness. It seemed like those berries lasted forever. They were just everyday blueberry bushes hanging over the side of the dirt road, and yet it felt like we could walk all day, eating berries, staining our hands and faces deep blue and there were always more.

We always made sure to leave more than we ate (which would have been our Aunt’s teaching). No one really knew who they belonged to, but we wanted to make sure there were always enough for any other dirt road wanderers. And so, year after year, we went up and down that little dirt road, gorging ourselves on blueberries; basking in an abundant supply of sweet summertime goodness.

Then, one year—when my sisters had entered their teens and maybe even early twenties, I walked out those dirt roads alone one summer vacation. I knew the way to those blueberry bushes by heart. My mind was racing with thoughts of their sweet goodness as I rounded the turn from one dirt road to *that* dirt road. I could almost taste them. And then I was shocked. Blocking the road from one side to the next was a large, gleaming metal gate. I can’t remember whether there was sign that actually said “DO NOT ENTER;” but the intention was clear. I pulled on it to make sure it was locked, but there was no getting through. There was no more seemingly eternal supply of blueberries to be had. They were blocked off by a gate.

A few years later I attended a small school based in Stowe, Vermont which was called Introspect. It had about the same number of teachers as students—four or five—and it taught largely through travel. We toured New England, the East Coast down to the Florida Keys, the Gulf States, the west, California and the mid-west in the course of two separate trips that lasted a

total of about three months. The travelling allowed me to begin to learn about how many different cultures there are in our one country.

When we were in South Carolina I came up against another sort of gate. When we visited Hilton Head, South Carolina I was informed that it was a “gated community.” I didn’t know what that meant. It was explained to me that certain people were expected to leave the island when the day was ending. It would be alright for people of color to work there and take care of the residents during the day, but they needed to leave when night came. The island was for white people to live on. I hope that Hilton Head has changed its policies. To be fair, I am not exactly sure what the official status of Hilton Head was when I was young, but this is how it was explained to me by a tour guide. It was a place for white people to live, and African-American folks and other people to work for them; as long as they left by night time. Then the gate would be in place—some people in a place of plenty, and other people left out. That just seems to be how gates work: dividing, limiting; keeping people apart.

Friends, I must confess, there is something in me which hates a gate. For these reasons I have named in part, but more importantly because I felt like there was a gate between me and church for a long time. Often the spokespeople of churches who make the evening news say simply awful things—especially the televangelists. When I was growing up those folks have said things which made me feel divided from them. They still do. They speak against equal rights for women. My Mom and sisters are women—how can *that* be right? They speak against people loving each other if they happened to be the same gender. I have met so many loving people of all sorts of sexualities—how can *that* be right? Those church representatives make it clear that people had to look and act certain ways in order to be welcomed in their churches. None of my family has ever been especially shiny or polished looking, and our hick blood goes way back...why aren’t we okay? Those church spokespersons made it clear there was a gate between their ways and the ways of me and my family, and the people I have come to love.

Which is why I really liked that advertisement which the United Church of Christ came up with a number of years ago; did you see it? There were two very large bouncers—big muscle-bound men—and they were standing outside the doors of a church. It was their job to let only the right sort of folks in. So one by one, people were kept out—same gender couples, people of color, maybe people who looked a little unusual. At first, it seems like the keepers of this particular gate were inspired by the Christians televangelists—the ones who turn so many others away. But then the mood shifts. The screen goes black. Then the screen says: “Jesus didn’t turn people away.” Those words fade and are replaced by “And neither do we.” Then the UCC logo comes up, followed by images of all sorts of people—all of whom are welcomed by our shared church.

“Jesus didn’t turn people away...” and yet, in this morning’s reading Jesus seems to be doing something like that. He calls people of different ways thieves and bandits two times. He warns

us that they will steal and kill and destroy. He tells us that it is only through him that we can know salvation, and that he is the gate and no one else.

When I first read this, I bristled. There *is* something in me that hates a gate, and it sounded like Jesus was getting in line with the televangelists, and setting himself up as a gate that keeps people out. What are we to do with this tricky passage? After all, I *am* a Christian—we all are, and we do follow the path which Jesus lays out for all of us to the best of our abilities. We *are* trying to enter the pasture through the gate of Jesus Christ. But to call all others thieves and murderers seems rather intolerant for our God of love. This gate of Jesus seems to let too few in. It is always a challenge for me to find those passages where Christ's acceptance seems to be less than my own. If I can conceive of God welcoming people from a variety of faiths into grace, or even paradise, why doesn't Jesus seem to here?

It could be I'm flat out wrong. Maybe all others are thieves and bandits who kill and destroy. Maybe Jesus is not only *my* way, but really the *only* way. That has often been the claim of Christians for many centuries, after all—especially televangelists and fundamentalists. But my heart wants more from our God of love. I want God to love *more* than I do—more than I *can*—or how can I call that being God in good faith? I think I even *need* God to love like that in order to really learn anything or grow my own little soul.

Fortunately, for my heart—and I think for all of ours—there is more to this picture than at first meets the eye. As is often the case, Jesus has a particular audience in mind when he uses broad and sweeping terms like “*all* who came before me.” Jesus likes to make strong statements and is no stranger to overstating his case for effect. In this case, the people who came before Jesus are the Pharisees. You remember them, of course—they were a school of prominent religious authorities who are depicted as being really zealous about religion and approaching it in very narrow ways. They were their own sort of gatekeepers; their own sort of televangelists. In fact, this morning's reading takes place immediately following an encounter between the narrowness of the Pharisees and Christ's openness.

Jesus had just healed a blind person on a Sabbath day by making a paste of mud with his own spittle. Because it was a Sabbath day, which is traditionally reserved for rest, the Pharisees derided Jesus for this action. They questioned his authority, made wild accusations and generally went completely bonkers because he had worked on the Sabbath. In the name of defending the holiness of God and the Sabbath—in the name of making sure they were both kept at a proper, limited place in human experience just beyond the gate, the Pharisees struck out at Jesus for being too flexible and open in his expression of his own faith.

Whereas traditional Pharisaic Judaism proclaimed God as remote from human experience Jesus showed here and often that God is among us all the time. He mixed his spittle with earth to

demonstrate that God's healing works 24/7. And he continues to demonstrate God's care for us into today's reading.

By implying that he is our shepherd here, and then talking about it at length moments later, Jesus indicates a caring and committed relationship between himself and us. In Jesus' time shepherds were not some idyllic pastoral dwellers as we now imagine them. They were people on the edge of culture—a little mysterious and possibly shady. Shepherds defended their flocks with vigor—often taking on wolves, and sometimes many. They might also travel long distances, or venture into dangerous caves or scamper half way down steep cliffs to save stray sheep. Shepherds were neither slouches nor meek. They went to the mat for their sheep; as Jesus does for all who call on him. For our part we need to follow Jesus and walk in his way, truth and life. And we are not Christ's only sheep. Only a few lines beyond this morning's reading, Jesus says "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice."¹ So, God's love is not only for Christians, even if the ancient Pharisees in particular might not lead other people to it very well.

Friends, there *is* something in me that hates a gate, but thanks be to God, Christ is not that kind of gate. By saying he is the gatekeeper and the gate Jesus tells us that he is a gate that opens instead of closing. Christ is telling us that he welcomes us into God's realm in ways that are effective and real. Not through narrow understandings of grace—like so many views in ancient times—but through opening up to us the realms of paradise, and welcoming us into God's nature, as surely as God's nature has entered humanity through Christ. Whether we are young or old, Jesus is a gate that opens to abundant sweet summer fruit. Whatever the tone of our skins, or shadings of our souls, Christ opens the way to God's abundance and blessings. No matter what sort of bodies we have or who we love, God rejoices simply that we love, for God *is* love.

Christ is a gate that opens for us to step into blessing and God's nature. And that's the good news of John's Gospel on this fourth Sunday in Eastertide.

Amen.

¹ John 10:16.

John 10:1-10

“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. 2The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. 7So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.