

Easter 4 (A)
April 30, 2023
Text: John 10:1-10

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About a year or so ago, my next-door neighbor built a beautiful wooden fence and gate to enclose his back yard. There's an elegance about how the fence and gate flow seamlessly together. But even though they look alike, the fence and the gate have completely different functions. The fence is to protect their dogs by keeping them out of the street and out of the neighborhood. The gate is to let people in to enjoy the beautiful backyard and patio.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus uses the image of a gate to describe himself and his work. And the reason for describing himself that way is that many of his contemporaries had decided that the main purpose of religion was to serve as a fence, to keep out everything bad—bad morals, bad practices, bad ideas, bad people. That was how they believed the people of God could live lives that were holy and acceptable to God. But Jesus saw himself and his work, his calling, in exactly the opposite way. He was a gate to open the way for people to come to God, including sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, including Gentiles, all of those outside the Law and outside the people of Israel. For Jesus, faith wasn't about shutting anyone out. It was about being open to living with forgiveness and compassion, with humility and generosity; it was about creating relationships and community, and finding that God is present in that way of living. God is there to bless and heal and give abundant life.

The occasion for Jesus speaking about himself as the gate was a controversy. There was a man who had been blind from birth, and Jesus gave him his sight. You would think everyone would recognize that as an incredible gift from God. They should rejoice! Except... the healing happened on the Sabbath. A huge debate erupted over whether the power behind the healing could possibly be God, or not. The problem was that the religious authorities had so narrowly limited how they understood God's commandment to keep the Sabbath holy that there was no room for putting God's love into practice on the Sabbath. They concluded that Jesus was a Law-breaker; so in their view it was impossible for Jesus' compassionate act to have come from God. And when the man who had been blind objected, telling them he believed Jesus was a prophet, since nothing but God's power could account for such a miracle, the authorities threw him out. They wanted it absolutely clear that their religious fence was more than high enough to keep out any dangerous influences.

That's the background for our reading this morning. When Jesus says he is the gate, he means he is the one who opens the way for people to experience the blessing of life with God, with all of God's people and God's beloved creation. Jesus is the gate, inviting everyone to enter into abundant life—a life that begins now and is brought to fulfillment in the life to come. Abundant life is Jesus' way of freedom and peace, his way of living with forgiveness and reconciliation, that creates connection and community and belonging, so that the blessings of life can flow to all of God's children. For example, the man born blind not only received his sight, so that he no longer had to beg for his bread every day. He also received connection to Jesus and community with all of Jesus' followers. He now belonged, he had a family of faith where he was valued and

safe and secure. But the authorities were unable to see any of that. God's expansive, inviting love was invisible to them, because they were focused on judgment and condemnation, so Jesus had some very harsh words for them. He called them thieves and bandits. They were not faithful shepherds taking care of God's flock.

Sadly, there are still people who see religion as a fence, not a gate. There are still people for whom religion primarily is an instrument of judgment and exclusion, and they use it to label and hurt other people. There are churches that are all about being anti-gay, or anti-abortion, or anti-trans, and they make religion out to be something ugly and harsh and mean. And in that way, they dishonor God, they make Christians look like a bunch of crazy people, and in their religious communities they create their own little corners of hell on earth. But there's one thing they can't do. They can't make Jesus not be the gate that opens the way for all people to experience peace and blessing and abundant life. The fundamentalists can spew their anger and hate, they can threaten violence, but Jesus still opens the way for everyone to experience the kindness and love and forgiveness of God. They can rant and rave all they want, but they cannot close the gate to shut you out, because Jesus is the gate who opens the way to God's love. And in his death and resurrection, Jesus has already shown that his love is stronger than hate, stronger than cruelty, stronger than violence, stronger than death. Jesus endured all of that, and on Easter morning, God raised him up, revealing the victory of God's love, the victory of God's compassion, the victory of God's forgiveness.

I wonder if you have experienced judgment and condemnation—maybe even from self-identified church people. But because Jesus is the gate, no one can ever shut you out of God's love and mercy and forgiveness. Even if you've made some really bad decisions in the past, Jesus is still the gate to life with God, and no one can ever shut you out from following Jesus and finding peace and a new beginning in his way of compassion and forgiveness. Or maybe you have gone through some tremendously difficult experiences in life. Know that no amount of loss or struggle or grief will ever be able to shut you out of God's love, because Jesus is the one who invites you to enter into his abundant life. Maybe you carry a load of guilt or shame with you that is just a burden. Please know that there is nothing that can stand between you and Jesus' powerful word of forgiveness, because Jesus is the gate to life with God. Or maybe things are going OK for you. There are some good things happening in your life—maybe it's your job or a relationship. Jesus calls you to experience something better than OK, something abundant, by following his way of compassion and humility and generosity, so that the blessings in your life can overflow to become blessing for others too. There are no life experiences, no successes or failures, that can disqualify you from the gate that Jesus holds open for you. It doesn't matter who you love, or whether your family approves. Nothing can shut the gate to love and acceptance that Jesus is for you. It doesn't matter what those internal voices say to you at 3:00 in the morning. Jesus is the one with the last word, and he holds the gate to God's love open for you, and nothing can shut it.

Jesus is the gate, and we experience his abundant life by entering that gate, by trusting his forgiveness is forgiveness for us, trusting that following his way of compassion for others is how we will experience God's deep compassion for us. Jesus embodies a way of living that connects

us to God and each other and to all of God's creatures. Following Jesus in his way of compassion and forgiveness and humility and generosity opens us to know the beauty and richness of all that God desires for us. And nothing can ever shut us out. Thanks be to God. Amen.