

Today is the third Sunday in Lent. During Lent this year, we are focusing on the question that Jesus posed to His disciples in Matthew 16:15 – “Who do you say that I am?” In order to grow closer to the Lord and to better understand His purpose for our lives, we each need to seriously consider this question and how we will respond to it. Who is Jesus Christ to you; what is your personal relationship with Him; and what does He want you to do to become the person you were created to be? What barriers do you need to remove between you and Jesus in order to grow closer to Him? I hope and pray that each of you are praying about this during these forty days of Lent.

To provide some insight into this issue and to help us address these questions, each Sunday during Lent, we will be studying one of the seven “I Am” sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John. In these sayings, Jesus uses seven common everyday images to reveal something new about Himself. So far, we have discussed Jesus as the Light of the World and as the Bread of Life.

This morning let’s look at the next “I Am” saying found in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, the first ten verses. In this chapter Jesus describes Himself as both the gate for the sheep and as the Good Shepherd. This morning let’s focus on the reference to the gate; next Sunday we’ll discuss the Good Shepherd.

Read John 10:1-10

Now depending on which translation of the Bible you use, here Jesus is talking about either gates or doors. I heard a story about a preacher who was out visiting the members of his congregation one day. He came to one house and rang the doorbell, but no one answered. So, he left his business card which quoted Revelation 3:20 – “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in and dine with him.” The next Sunday the lady of the house returned his card with her own quote from Genesis 3:10 – “I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.” It pays to know your Bible verses!

Building on his audience’s familiarity with gates and their purpose of providing entrance, Jesus states in the ninth verse of our text: “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.” From the beginning of time, humanity has been looking for a way to eternal life, and here Jesus clearly declares that He is that gateway. Jesus goes on to warn that there will be false prophets who will claim to be the way to God, people like Jim Jones and other cult leaders. The *Message* paraphrases this verse as follows: “I am the Gate for the sheep. All others are up to no good – sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn’t listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for – will go in and out and find pasture.”

Jesus calls Himself the “gateway of the sheep.” The portrayal of us as sheep, and Jesus and God as the Shepherd has a long and rich history in the Bible. It is interesting to note that Jesus does not intend for the sheep to spend the rest of their lives in a sheep pen. In verse 9, Jesus says that the sheep will come in and go out and find pasture. The Hebrew phrase “can go in and out” was a Jewish way of describing a life that is safe and secure. Thus, if our life is in the hands of God, if we are in His fold, all our worries and fears are gone.

This promise recalls the words of King David in our Responsive Reading from the 23rd Psalm: “He makes me lie down in green pastures.” In addition, Jesus is building on His promises of providing living water and the bread of life to those who come to Him. The sheepfold is a place for rest and restoring strength during the night or during a storm. But when the next day comes, the sheep go back out to the pasture, out into the real world. We come to Jesus for rest, restoration, and comfort. Then we go back into the world recharged. Jesus is our source of spiritual strength and well-being. As the gate, Jesus is not only our way in, but He is also our protection from those who would do us harm.

Now verse 10 is one of my favorite passages in the Bible; you may have heard me quote it before: “I came that they may have life and might have it abundantly.” Here Jesus promises to give us an abundant life – not as the world gives with its empty promises but a life that is full; a life as God intended for us from the beginning of time. When we try to live life on our own terms according to the world’s values, life is dull and without hope and purpose. However, when we walk with Jesus, there is a new vitality, a new outlook on life. Life is better than we ever dreamed possible. It is only when we walk with Jesus that life becomes worth living and we begin to live in the real sense of the word. There is no limit to the life that Jesus Christ offers to each of us. So, how is your life this morning? Are you really alive and enjoying every moment or are you just going through the motions? Is your life one of joys or one of complaints and worries? Are your pastures green or full of goat heads? Jesus offers a better way, if you are willing to take it.

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, William Barclay, the great Scottish theologian, describes two types of sheep pens used during this time period. One was located in the village and was the community pen where several shepherds might leave their flocks overnight or for several days. This sheep pen usually had a strong gate and also a guardian or gatekeeper.

But the second, more modest sheep pen was located out in the countryside. It was usually a stone wall or fenced enclosure without a door or a gate where the sheep could be held safely at night. The shepherd slept in the doorway or opening. Thus, no sheep could get out, nor could any wild animal get in without awakening the shepherd. In other words, the shepherd was the gate.

Now whether Jesus was referring to the gate of the community sheep pen that was strong and well-guarded or to the rural makeshift sheep pen with the shepherd as the gate is somewhat immaterial. In either case, the sheep are well protected and can rest in peace knowing that they are safe and well cared for. During the night, the sheep might become startled and awakened. If so, they would certainly look towards the gate. If they could see the shepherd sitting or lying there as the gate, the sheep would know, even in their fear, that the shepherd would protect them. In the same way, Jesus as our Shepherd, protects us and drives away all our fears.

In this passage, the Apostle John is also building upon the ancient concept of a door to heaven. In Revelation 21:12-13, heaven is described as having a high wall with twelve gates: three on the east, three on the north, three on the south and three on the west. By the way, these gates are named for the twelve tribes of Israel; so, one of the gates is named Reuben; thus, you may want to be nice to me! Through these gates, those who trust in Jesus Christ will come from every nation on earth. The gate is open and the invitation is clear. Jesus declares: "I am the Gate." Everyone who enters through Him will be saved. This promise of entering through the gate to find salvation fulfills the prophesy in verses 19 and 20 of the 118th Psalm: "Open for me the gates of righteousness. I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter."

While recognizing that Jesus identifies Himself as the Gate, there are two key points that we need to consider. First, all other doors or gates are closed. Those who seek to enter into God's kingdom through other doors will only find a dead end. Those doors lead to nowhere.

Second, the door that Jesus offers to each of us does not stay open forever. This door will close at our death and so will His invitation for eternal life. The door also closes if Jesus happens to return during our lifetime. In the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids in Matthew 25, when the Bridegroom comes, those who are prepared will enter with Him, and the door will be shut behind them. Verse 11 tells us that those who were unprepared for the coming of the Bridegroom begged Him to open the door, and let them in, but the answer was no. Then comes one of the hardest sayings in the Bible: "I don't know you." To me this is the worst thing any of us or our loved ones or friends could ever hear from our Lord and Savior – "I don't know you." You never want to hear that! That's why we must use this time during Lent to make sure we are prepared to enter with the Lord.

Matthew 7:13-14 states – "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it." Now this description of the gate as narrow seems contrary to the eighth chapter of Romans where the Apostle Paul tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God. If there is anything that we can count on in this life it is that

there is no limit to God's love for us. But what makes the door narrow in this case is our own unwillingness to go through it, or our desire to try and find another opening that is less demanding.

Someone once told me about her brother who had chosen the wide, open Interstate highway of life – doing it his way like Frank Sinatra sang about. When he was confronted with the reality that one day each of us must stand before God and be held accountable for the way we lived our life, he said that he would simply say that he was sorry and ask for forgiveness.

Unfortunately, by then it will be too late. There are no shortcuts; there is no jumping over the fence like a thief. It is during this life that we must each choose whether we will follow Jesus on the narrow road of a disciplined life, or the devil's road of temptations, worldly pleasures and easy living that eventually leads nowhere.

Have you ever been caught in a revolving door? It just keeps going round and round, and you can't get out. Well, some people are like that, they have no idea where they are headed or which way to go. There was a disturbing news article a while back that stated that the number of Americans who claim to have no religion has doubled in the last ten years; and believe me that number continues to grow. These are the lost sheep who either don't know where the gate is because nobody has told them or they have refused to accept the Lord's invitation. We are now well in the second or third generation of families that are not actively involved in the church. The article went on to say that today faith is more of a "fashion statement" than a commitment. As an American and a minister this trend definitely concerns me.

Jesus said that He is the door, the only way to God; did you hear that – the only way? Now some of us may not agree with this or want to hear it because a loved one may not believe in Jesus Christ or we may not be sure ourselves whether we truly believe. But I challenge anyone to show me anywhere in the Bible where it says that we can be saved, have eternal life, without belief in Jesus Christ. If you can, then our celebration of the Lord's Supper, the cross, the Resurrection and Easter would be all wrong, and Christianity would be a false teaching, and we would have fallen for the greatest deception in the history of the world.

I also challenge any denomination or cult that claims that they are the only way to heaven – that you must belong to their church and follow their teachings in order to be saved. In our text, Jesus warns about such false teachers and leaders who would climb over the wall and try to steal His sheep and lead them in the wrong direction. Jesus never said that you had to be a Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, or whatever to get into heaven. As a matter of fact, when Jesus made this statement in verse 9, there was no Christian church; it did not come into existence until after His resurrection and Pentecost. I saw an advertisement once from one denomination that stated that they were the church established by Jesus Christ. Jesus did not establish any particular denomination; He established the Church universal! There is only one

gate, one way; all that we as denominations and churches have done is to create a bunch of separate sheep pens.

One last point or warning from this text – Jesus is the Gate. Do we as Christians wrongly assume the role of gatekeeper? Nowhere does Jesus give us this authority, but many Christians have taken it upon themselves to decide who is welcome in church and who is to be saved. In some ways we are guilty of acting like a country club and only welcoming those who look like us, act like us or agree with us. Jesus is the door and that door is open to all who will enter. Our role is to make sure that everyone who walks through the doors of this church are welcome and accepted right away. We must make sure that all visitors feel welcome in the name of Jesus Christ.

Until Jesus came, God was a stranger to most people, but Jesus came to show us who God really is and to open the way to Him. Jesus as the door makes it possible for us to know God and to have a personal relationship with Him. The bottom line is this: each person must make a choice – we either choose to follow Jesus on the narrow road, or we take the world's highway that leads nowhere. It's a personal choice; nobody can make it for us. The world's highway may look easy and attractive initially but believe me it leads straight to destruction and a dead end. But the door that Jesus offers leads to abundant life; a life worth living. Which door will you choose? Choose wisely because your place in eternity depends on it. Enter the gate and embrace the Good Shepherd. Amen