

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
August 14, 2011
©2011

Gates and Doors

(John 10:7-10) 7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate, the door, for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate, the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Gates. Doors. They can have an emotional kick to them, don't they, ranging from the silly to the serious. Did you ever have that experience of rushing around town, your mind on a hundred different things as you swung by, say, the dry cleaners to pick up the clothes you'd been meaning to pick up for weeks, went striding to the door – and it was locked? You'd forgotten that they were closed on Saturday. Isn't that a weird and odd feeling, as you stand there for just a moment, as if you can't quite understand or make sense of this opening that won't open? When I was a youngster, I knew, come November, exactly which closet the Christmas presents were hidden in. And I knew where the key to the closet was hidden. And that locked door exercised a lot of power and pull on my imagination, my worries and my fears, my hopes during those pre-Christmas weeks as I brooded on what was in there, about whether I should I peek when they weren't home, what if they found out, what if I got in and there wasn't anything I was hoping for in there, what if there wasn't anything at all in there!

Gates and doors. Our language is full of sayings about doors and gates – we worry when public officials meet behind closed and locked doors. Some folks live in what have come to be called "gated communities." One of the things Barbara and I experienced in Hawaii was the powerful feelings that were evoked when some mainlander came in and bought a piece of property and then gated the roads and trails that had been used by the community for generations – feelings of anger, of frustration, of disbelief. These images of, the experiences of, gates and doors can indeed be very, very powerful. Whether silly or

serious, these images, these metaphors, do have a tremendous power to them.

And in today's scripture, Jesus uses just such a powerful image: "*I am the gate, I am the door*" he says. This passage, though, is so rich and full, so replete with many metaphors – shepherds, sheep, gates, gatekeepers – that it could be the occasion for any entire sermon series itself. But this morning, I want to focus on this notion of Jesus as the gate, as the door. Today and the next two Sundays, I am going to preach on three of these "I am" statements of Jesus' from the Gospel of John. These are some of the most beloved and memorable lines in the gospels, and they have much teach us. But in order to do that, it will be helpful to some of the background of John's gospel and some of the distinctive ways that John portrays Jesus.

John's gospel, according to most scholars, was the last gospel written, probably between the years 80 and 100. It is by far the most elaborate of the gospels, and its style is elegant, as opposed, say, to Mark whose writing is much simpler. John's timetable of the events of Jesus' life also completely differs from Matthew's, Mark's or Luke's telling of the story. And most importantly, John was written at a terrible time in the life of the young church, when both Roman persecution was increasing and when there was more and more, sadly, animosity between churches and synagogues. For a variety of reasons, mostly having to do with Roman persecution, church and synagogue were becoming very separated. This is so different than, say, those first years after the life of Jesus in which these believers in fact considered themselves Jews and worshiped in the Temple. But the last decades of the first century saw a sad separation between Jews and Christians. Some synagogues had kicked some members out who wanted to believe in Jesus as the messiah, and, in turn, some congregations had kicked out folks who wanted to continue to practice their beloved Jewish customs. As we all know, it is sometimes family fights that can be the meanest and where things get said that you might never say to strangers. And in the midst of it all, Rome was hunting down both Christians and Jews and killing them.

The stakes were high, there was deep emotion, and folks were hurting.

It is the in the midst of that situation that John recalls and retells these “I am” statements of Jesus’. And we must realize that all of those statements can in fact be looked at in two ways: to use fancy words, you can either see these as “Christological” statements or “existential” ones. Put in plain language, you can either understand these statements as telling us something about who Jesus is, or you can understand them as telling us something about how life is. Yet even that’s all very abstract; let me try it this way: You can translate these statements of Jesus’ in two equally possible ways; take for example the statement where he compares himself to bread, you can translate it either “I am the bread of life” or “The bread of life – that’s me!”¹ Both have their place and their power. When you want to know more about Jesus, you will likely focus on the first statement, “I am the bread of life.” But when you’re hungering for something truly nourishing, that truly feeds your soul, then Jesus says to you, “That bread, that nourishment, your looking for? It’s me. It’s me.”

And so what of today’s scripture: “I am the gate. I am the door.” Or, equally plausibly translated, “The gate, the door – that’s me I” What is Jesus saying here? What is the good news that is being offered to us through this image? Well, I suggest that each one of us think for a moment on those times in our lives in which there has been what felt like a gate, a door, blocking our way from something. Maybe for you that moment is now. Maybe it was a time in your past. But whether then or now, I suspect that every one of us have had those moments when there was someplace we wanted to be, or something we wanted to do, or a decision we wanted to make, or a new way of being that we wanted to have that seemed to be blocked by a locked gate, a locked door. And those are precisely

¹I am indebted to Gerald Janzen of Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana, for this insight.

the kind of moments when folks begin to wonder about the nature of the doors, the gates, in their lives. I suspect most of you remember the old television game show, “Let’s Make a Deal”? Contestants on that show were given the option to choose Door Number One or Door Number Two or Door Number Three in order to win some sort of prize and continue on in the game. There are times when that is what life feels like – in front of us are, sometimes, not just one, or two, or three doors, but a whole roomful of doors, a whole Home Depot showroom full of doors. And there have even been times in my life – is this true for yours? – that I wasn’t even sure where to find the door at all; and life was more like being trapped in one of those Las Vegas casinos that try their very hardest to keep you where you are by making it not very obvious at all where the doors are.

And so it is, in those moments, that Jesus comes and says “You’re looking for the door, the gate, that will get your life from wherever you are to a better place? Well, that door is me.” In other words, Jesus is saying this: when the doors, the gates of your life seem locked against change or transformation, or when your life seems to be in a trap where the door, the gate, isn’t even obvious, when it’s not clear where the door is or how to open it – Jesus says “the door you’re looking for is me.”

Is that at all your life? Is it the life of someone you love, whom you worry about and pray about and sometimes anguish over? It’s a trapped feeling, isn’t it? Not knowing where the door is or how to unlock it.² It happens whenever the patterns of one’s life seem to get fixed and unchangeable; when you keep making the same mistakes over and over again----or the same evil deeds get done to you, over and over again. And there just doesn’t seem to be any way out. An addiction feels like that. You try and you try and you try. But you’re locked up inside the drugs or the booze or the anger or the despair and you

²In what follows I am grateful to make use of the insights and some of the phrasing from Barbara Blaisdell’s sermon, “The Door,” preached at First Christian Church, Concord, California, February 1, 1998.

can't seem to escape. There are relationships that feel like that sometimes: marriages, partnerships, friendships, family. Relationships where something's gone wrong and it's begun to close in around you, and the doorway, the gateway, to move forward seems to be locked or even to have just disappeared. Something needs to change but you can't seem to change it. People can feel trapped inside their work. Or trapped inside their sadness or grief. Or trapped inside their sickness. Or trapped inside their fear. Or trapped inside their anger and resentment. They can be locked inside themselves nursing and brooding over a past hurt. They may not even want to do it; but they don't know where the door, the gate is. Despair comes in many forms. But this is the feeling of every form of despair: that the nightmare is never going to end; that you are powerless to change your life.

And what does it mean to say to people with this experience that the door, the gate is Christ? Well, let me quote from Barbara Blaisdell who answers that question in a lovely and powerful way: *"It means that when we are all out of alternatives, when nothing will budge, when nothing will change, when everywhere we turn we see only bare walls and the walls are closing in, then God in Christ, just then opens up new possibilities we had never imagined; unforeseen freedoms; new openings for ways to live, free at last!"*⁸

Now there is no magic here and all too often we completely miss the that door opening, that gate swinging wide in front of us. Our eyes may so full of tears we don't even see it. Or we turn away from it and remain trapped inside. Because walking through a door, a gate, even one that opens toward freedom, even a door that opens toward safety – walking through that door, that gate, can feel oh-so-risky. But listen again to the stories of people who have taken that risk and walked through the door that God alone could open up for them:

God's children, Israel, began as slaves in Egypt. Do you know what the Hebrew word for Egypt means? It means: "narrow place." The Hebrews were trapped inside a

³ibid.

narrow place, enslaved in a place where there was no exit. But where there was no exit, where there was no logical, reasonable chance for hope, God made a door and they walked free.

Or remember Lazarus? Lazarus was the one who got sick and died and was buried. And a friend who loved him, whose name was Jesus, came to his grave with tears in his eyes and more tears streaming down his face, tears of grief for all that had closed in on his friend. Jesus came to that grave and said, "Take away the stone that blocks that grave." And then he said, "Friend, come out!" And from that grave, from the one place on earth that everybody knows that no one escapes, from the place where the walls are thick and the darkness real, where in the coldness, death puts up a no exit sign; from that place a human being walked out into the light and into the arms of Christ. Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, I am free at last.

Or consider Zacchaeus, remember him? Barbara preached on his story so compellingly a few weeks ago. Zacchaeus, tax collector for the hated Romans, despised by his friends and family. One who had himself come to despise his life and what he was doing to his people and who climbed up in that tree to get a glimpse of Jesus, to maybe find a door that he didn't know might be there. And Jesus spotted him and indeed open a door, showed Zacchaeus that his past need not forever trap him. With those simple words, "Zacchaeus, come down; you're coming to my house today" he opened wide a door that would be Zacchaeus' exit from shame and sadness, freed for new life.

That is the promise of Jesus Christ to you this day. And not just to you alone, but also to anyone you know who faces obstacles, struggles – anything that locks them in or shuts them out. Jesus Christ comes to all this day to say: "If you feel trapped, I am the gate, I am the door. Knock and it **will** be opened." Do you know anyone who needs to know that good news? Do you know anyone who is groping for the gate that would lead them to better places. Then find a way tomorrow or this week to tell them that door is

Jesus Christ. Tell them of those times in your life that He opened a doorway for you, swung that gate wide that you could find your way to new life.