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## I Am/We Are: A Series on Jesus' "I Am" Statements III. "In the Fold... Out of the Fold"

John 10:1-11, 14-16 The Message "Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good—a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it." Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those 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 freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only here to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of. "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary. A hired man is not a real shepherd. The sheep mean nothing to him. He sees a wolf come and runs for it, leaving the sheep to be ravaged and scattered by the wolf. He's only in it for the money. The sheep don't matter to him...." I am the Good Shepherd. I know my own sheep and my own sheep know me. In the same way, the Father knows me and I know the Father. I put the sheep before myself, sacrificing myself if necessary. You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen. I need to gather and bring them, too. They'll also recognize my voice. Then it will be one flock, one Shepherd.

My mother had a seemingly endless supply of sayings, many of which I have never heard anyone else use. For example, when we had been particularly slow about getting ready to go somewhere (and you folks who are parents know that the time it takes to get ready to go somewhere seems to triple with each child), and then when we were finally on our way, she would often say "Well, we're off – like a herd of turtles in a jar of peanut butter." When she was annoyed with something that we had said, my brother Jim and I both remember her saying "Is it really necessary to talk that way?" (I always wanted to say, "No, but it's fun.") Jim particularly remembers her, when we were verging on being rude, saying to us with that stern mother-look on her face "Mind

your p's and q's!" I still don't know what a "p" or a "q" is, though. The one, though, that she often invoked, particularly in the face of somebody who had done something particularly odd or weird was to say "Well, it takes all kinds, doesn't it?" This was almost a mantra with her, which indeed expressed her gift for tolerance. It's why I was so startled once when, as an adult, I heard her say this familiar phrase, "Well, it takes all kinds" and then pause for a moment and add something I'd never heard her say before. "You know, actually we could do without some of those kinds, couldn't we?"

That addition expressed the conflict, as old as humanity itself, between openness and boundaries, between acceptingness and principles of what ought not be accepted, between welcoming difference and wondering where the legitimate limits of difference ought to be drawn. My mother's statement was one that the late marvelous Disciples preacher Fred Craddock would have understood. Dr. Craddock once said that in the Church's 2000 year history there have been two principles that have competed with one another to organize and structure the life of any congregation and, in fact, the life of any Christian as he or she interacts with the world. Those two principles are these: "**Ya'll Come**," on the one hand, and "**Quality Control**," on the other hand. "**Ya'll Come**" – meaning that the doors are open wide everyone is welcome and wanted – and "**Quality Control**" – meaning the idea that there must be *some* sort of standards, *some* rules that define what is and what is not acceptable. Dr. Craddock goes on to say that while any church actually needs **both** of these principles, too often one of them get **over**-emphasized almost to the exclusion of the other. For example, it is absolutely true that the church needs to be a place where everyone is indeed welcome – "**Ya'll Come**." At First Christian, we express that with the phrase "radical hospitality." But – the "ya'll come" principle can go too far when it slides into assuming that it's therefore ok for any Christian, any church member to think absolutely *whatever* they want to think or to do absolutely *whatever* they want to do and those still

be **Christian** things to think and do. There are some things that **any** church and any Christian **simply has to** challenge when they are done or said in the name of Christ. But, on the other hand “**Quality Control**” can get very **over-**emphasized when it comes to mean that if you don’t believe this or that about a raft of issues then you are not really Christian either. We don’t have to look far to see churches that teach a litmus list of the things you need to believe in order to truly count as Christian.

Jesus’ teachings in our scripture for today go to the very heart of this tension between “**Ya’ll Come**” and “**Quality Control.**” This scripture, the next in our sermon series on His “I am” statements in the gospel of John, is one where Jesus first talks about Himself as being “the good shepherd,” and then, when the disciples seem to not be getting his point, he talks about Himself as being “the gate” Hear again how Eugene Petersen translates these latter words: *“I am the Gate for the sheep. All those 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....”* In the more traditional translation it goes this way: *“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 them. I am the **gate**. Whoever enters by me will be saved....”* And now you can almost see it: his listeners’ ears **perk up**. Because that’s one of the facts of human sinfulness: we tend to pay attention when we hear about those on the outside and those on the inside, those in the inner circle and those on the outside looking in, those who get to go through the gate and those who don’t. You need look no further than the tv shows “American Idol” or “Survivor,” to see the popularity of “entertainment” based on some people being on the outside.

This human fascination with those who are in and those who are out is why Jesus’ image about being the shepherd of the sheep – **ALL** the sheep – **is** so hard for us to understand, sometimes. We sometimes secretly don’t **like** it that the rain falls, as

Jesus says elsewhere, on the just and the unjust alike. We sometimes secretly think that we'd do a more fair job of running the world and we'd make sure that the folks who deserved the goodies got the goodies and the folks who didn't didn't. After all, shouldn't those who play by the rules, who work hard, who don't make waves be on the inside, and those recalcitrant, difficult, annoying, lazy, weird folks ought to be on the outside. Yes, our ears perk up when we hear Jesus talking about **gates**, and we think *"Alright – now we're going to get some quality control!"*

But let me tell you a story that Dr. Fred Craddock tells; it's one I've shared before but it's well worth repeating here. Dr. Craddock was the student pastor of a church near Oak Ridge, Tennessee. It was during the boom in the 1950s when Oak Ridge became so much a part of the country's atomic energy program, and, as he put it, *"that little bitty town became a booming city just overnight.... People came in from everywhere and pitched tents, lived in wagons... [and] trailer parks...."* Dr. Craddock's church was not far from those trailer parks and one Sunday after church he asked the church board to meet and help him start an evangelism program to reach out to those folks who lived in those trailer parks. Well, after some discussion, instead of voting to do something to reach out to those folks, the board instead approved a very different motion – *"that to be a member of this church, you must own property in this county."* Dr. Craddock was astonished and upset and voted against it – but the board reminded him that he was just a "kid preacher" and didn't have a vote anyway. Many years later, Dr. Craddock was passing through the area with his wife, and he wanted to show her the church where this had happened. Well, he found it. And let me quote to you in his own words what he found:

*It was different. The parking lot was full – motorcycles and trucks and cars all packed in there. And out in front a great big sign, "Barbecue, all you can eat." ...The pews are [now] against a wall... and the organ pushed over in the corner. And there are all...these people sitting there eating barbecued pork and chicken*

*and ribs – all kinds of people. I said to [my wife] Nettie, “It’s a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise those people couldn’t be in here.”<sup>1</sup>*

What a painful and instructive story. What a sad example of that urge for quality control run amok. What a sad example of folks who wanted too badly to be safely inside that gate while others – who were different, who might change things – stayed outside.

When Jesus says “*I am the gate*” we profoundly misunderstand him if we hear this image as encouragement to us to huddle up together and keep away what is different simply because it is different. Oh, I know the temptation to do so. I am the first among sinners in this regard. There are things that I profoundly dislike about some of the changes that have happened around us, and part of me indeed wants to retreat inside a locked gate and swing it shut behind me. To retreat into nostalgia for the way things used to be. To try to bar the door, close the gate, against change and difference. I know what that feels like, I know that temptation. But, my friends, that isn’t the kind of gate that Jesus is talking about. The gate that Jesus describes himself as being is not one of those one-way gates that swings shut in one direction to keep all the right people on one side and all the scary people, all the annoying people, all the odd people on the other. No, Jesus’ little phrase in his description tips us off that He is a **different** kind of gate; did you hear it: “*I am the gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for - will freely go in and out.....*” **And go out. And go out.**

Christ the Good Shepherd, Christ the Gate, gathers us safely inside that sheepfold for nourishment, for rest, for strengthening. And then Christ sends us back out; Christ the gate swings wide and tells us to go through Him back into the world, the world that needs us so badly, the world that needs to know that there is hope, there is life, there is love that nothing can defeat. This gate isn’t a means to keep out the riffraff

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<sup>1</sup>**Craddock Stories** by Fred Craddock, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001, pages 28-29.

while we are safe inside; no, this gate swings open to send us back into a messy, ambiguous, frustrating, sometimes scary world to live by faith.

Bible scholar William Barclay tells a story about a group of World War I soldiers who lost a friend in battle and wanted to give their fallen comrade a decent burial. They found a church with a graveyard behind it, surrounded by a white fence. They sought out the priest and asked if their friend could be buried there in the church graveyard. "Was he Catholic?" the priest asked. "No he was not," answered the soldiers. "I'm sorry, then," said the priest, "our graveyard is reserved for the members of the Roman Catholic Church. But you can bury your friend outside the fence, outside the gate. And I will see that the gravesite is cared for." "Thank you, Father," said the soldiers, and they proceeded to bury their friend just outside the graveyard, on the other side of the fence, just beyond the gate. When the war ended, but before those soldiers returned home, they decided to visit the grave of their friend. They remembered the location of the church and the grave. They searched for their friend's grave, but couldn't find it. Finally, they went to the priest to inquire as to its location. "Sir, we cannot find our friend's grave," said the soldiers to the priest. "Well," answered the priest. "After you buried your fallen friend, it just didn't seem right to me that he should be buried there, outside the fence." "So you moved his grave?" asked the soldiers. "No," said the priest. "I moved the fence."<sup>2</sup>

At the close of this remarkable scripture, Jesus says this: "You need to know that I have other sheep in addition to those in this pen," ***"I have other sheep not of this fold,"*** as the New Revised Version has it. And you know what?

- Some of those sheep live their lives outside of the fence.
- Some of those sheep do not even know how lost they are.

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<sup>2</sup>Adapted from Rev. Russell Peterman's telling of this story in his article "Inside the Fence," Crossroads, the newsletter of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Concord, California, March 27, 2008, page 2. [www.concordfcc.net/newsletters/](http://www.concordfcc.net/newsletters/)

- Some of those sheep wonder why despite their success, their lives seem empty.
- Others of those sheep are forced to wander in lean pastures where life is perilous and hard-scrabble and there is always too little to eat, where economic and racial injustice scar them and all of us in ways that we too often are reluctant to name and acknowledge.
- Some of those sheep have been hurt by experiences of “church” which judged them harshly and slammed the gate in their faces with a kind of self-righteous glee.
- Some of the sheep outside that fence, on the other side of the gate have just given up, and shamble sadly through their days one foot in front of the other and expect nothing and look forward to nothing.

My friends, do you know some of those sheep? Are they your friends, your neighbors, your co-workers? Well, you know what Jesus would have you do. For He has brought you, led you into the fold, into a safe place of warmth, of love, of meaning. He has led you, as the hymn says, “safely home.” But my friends, that gate through which you followed him – he’s now swinging it open the other way. And he’s inviting you to go out through that gate, to find those other sheep not of this fold, those who are lost and hurting and hopeless. He’s ready to lead you back out to do his work, to be his witnesses, to find those lost sheep. Will you follow Him?