

The Only Way

A few years ago, my sister and her husband, Adam, moved to Texas. Adam was to pursue his PhD in chemistry. They wanted to be a part of a local church, and found a beautiful church down the street. The church had warm, loving congregants, a kind pastor who preached well, and a *spectacular* choir. My sister joined the choir and nearly every Sunday, she and Adam would go out to lunch with a sweet older woman they “adopted” as their grandmother. They were active in the church and thought of becoming members.

A year-and-a-half later, their pastor preached from John 14. “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn 14:6). He paused. “Some people believe that this passage means that Jesus is the *only* way, and some believe Jesus is *one* of the ways. Either way you believe is okay.”

They were *shocked*. *Did he really say that?* This was a *Baptist* church in Texas. They met with their deacon to inquire if the pastor meant what he said. The deacon had been gone that Sunday, so he could not address their question directly. My sister said that he never addressed their concern and did not seem to think it was a big deal. He *was* concerned, however, that they might leave the church.

As much as they loved this church, they could no longer remain with a church that did not believe that Jesus alone saves. For them, it was not simply a difference of opinion; it was *the* linchpin – Jesus alone saves.

The pastor in Texas is not alone in his pluralistic theology. One pastor in Oregon goes further, writing in his blog, “I’m a Presbyterian minister who doesn’t believe in God.” Though he doesn’t believe in God, he utilizes the word “God” in worship services, because, “he [finds] that ‘God’... is shorthand for all the things for which [he longs]: beauty, truth, healing, and justice. They’re all expressed by this symbol and the stories about it.” He writes, “Someone quipped that my congregation is BYOG: Bring Your Own God. I *use* that and invite people to ‘bring their own God’ — or none at all. While the symbol ‘God’ is part of our cultural tradition, you can take it or leave it or redefine it to your liking.”¹

Perhaps, like me, you are angered with these pastors. *How can they call themselves Christian pastors if they believe that any road leads to salvation or that God is simply symbolic language? They ought not to be leaders in the church!*

And this is our launching point for today’s text. When Jesus calls himself the gate in John 10, he is warning his people *not* against the dangers of other religions, but against *godly* religious leaders.

In John 9, we read the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. Jesus is with his disciples on the Sabbath and he heals a blind man. Jewish religious leaders, Pharisees, see the healed man, and do *not* give glory to God. They instead claim that Jesus *must* be a sinner, since he healed on the Sabbath (Jn 9:16). Only *sinners* break the Sabbath, they say.

The healed man, however, refuses to call Jesus a sinner. He knows that he may be kicked out of his religious group for disagreeing with the Pharisees, but takes the risk anyway. He disagrees with the Pharisees, and they kick him out.

Jesus goes out and finds the man he healed. He does not leave him alone or leave him in the margins; he *goes out* to him. He asks if the man believes in him, and he says, “Lord, I believe,” and he worships him (Jn 9:38). Not long after the man’s confession, Pharisees jump into the conversation.

Because the author John does not tell us that the audience or location shift in John 10, we understand that Jesus’ audience remains the same. In John 10, Jesus’ audience is his disciples, the man who had been born blind, and Pharisees.

¹ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2015/03/17/im-a-presbyterian-minister-who-doesnt-believe-in-god-2/>

“Very truly I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber,” Jesus says (Jn 10:1). In first century Near Eastern culture, sheep pens were made of stones and had a gap as the gate. The shepherd would herd the sheep into the pen for safety and would lie across the gap to protect the sheep.² Sheep were valuable, so shepherds would do anything to save the sheep under their protection. If someone were to try to steal the sheep, they would bypass the shepherd at the gate and try to climb over the pen to steal the sheep.

Jesus continues, “The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (Jn 10:3b). In first century Near Eastern culture, shepherds led their flocks by the sound of their voice.³

In recent history, there is a story of a Palestinian woman who used this same technique. The woman “had lost her husband in a recent conflict with Israel and...was consequently in dire need. [She] was finally permitted by a...hesitant Israeli officer to call her sheep out of a huge mass of sequestered and detained animals. The officer at first ‘pointed to the pen containing hundreds of animals and humorously quipped that it was impossible [for her to call out her own small flock]. She asked that if she could in fact separate them herself, would he be willing to let her take them? He agreed. A soldier opened the gate and the woman’s son produced a small reed flute. He played a simple tune again and again – and soon sheep heads began popping up across the pen. The young boy continued his music and walked home, followed by his flock of twenty-five sheep.”⁴

The sheep know the voice of the shepherd, and follow him (Jn 10:4). They do not follow the voice of a stranger, because they do not know his voice (Jn 10:5). I’ve got a few questions for you. Feel free to shout them out. (Disciples, Pharisees, blind man.) In this passage, who do you think the thieves and robbers are? (The Pharisees or any who do not go through the gate.) Who are the sheep? (The man born blind and others who follow.) Who are the shepherds? (The leaders who believe and follow Jesus Christ.) Verse 6 says that Jesus’ audience “did not understand what he was saying to them.” Perhaps this text is easy for us to understand, because we are on the outside looking in, but it certainly was *not* clear to Jesus’ audience.

He continues, “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. [The sheep] will come in and go out, and find pasture” (Jn 10:9). Jesus claims to be the only way. *He* is the gate.

Perhaps as we hear this story from John 10, we are angry with the Pharisees. How *dare* they dismiss the blind man and act as gates for salvation?! Jesus *alone* is the gate. Thank God we are not like the Pharisees! Or are we?

Isn’t this our great temptation too, to be another gate? Instead of pointing others to Jesus, the true gate, we point to ourselves. We divert the sheep from the true gate and tell them to go through us. It can happen to anyone, and has likely happened to *all* of us. We like to be authoritative, to have the answers. We don’t like pointing others *away* from us; we want to point others *to* us.

This is the struggle of the Christian life – struggling to follow the true shepherd, Jesus, and pointing others to follow him as well. As Oswald Chambers wrote in *My Utmost for His Highest*, “Our work is not to save souls, but to disciple them. Salvation and sanctification are the work of *God’s* sovereign grace, and *our* work as His disciples is to disciple others’ lives until they are totally yielded to God.”⁵

You and I are *not* the gate. You and I do not make the rules or set the agenda; our job is to follow and obey. We will often get it wrong. We will forget and believe that we are the gate. And we will do it without noticing it. This is why we *desperately* need to be reminded that Jesus *alone* is the gate to salvation. This is why we need to meet together and to encourage one another toward love and good deeds. As the author of Hebrews writes, “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is *faithful*. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

² Eerdman’s, 951.

³ MacArthur Study Bible.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, *The Gospel of John*, 616.

⁵ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest*, April 24.

not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but *encouraging* one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:23 – 25). The good news is that despite our ill-placed encouragement toward ourselves, Jesus keeps the gate open and continues to call us to himself.

There is an elderly gentleman in Fresno by the name of Howard. Howard is a jokester and his memory is steadily declining. I went to visit him one day at his care facility, and he *recognized* me. He told the others at his table, “This is the associate pastor of my church!” And then he turned to me and asked, “Did you come here because you thought I was going to hell?!” I laughed and said, “Of course not!” “I haven’t been to church in 3 years!” (It had actually been 3 months.) “I’m probably going to hell then!” I stopped laughing and realized that Howard had asked me a serious question. “Do you think you’re going to hell, Howard?” “Well, I haven’t been to church in a long time,” he said. “Well then, since you can’t make it to church, the church will come to you,” I said. I kicked myself for not bringing the communion kit, but sat down with him for Scripture reading and prayer.

Howard was not known to be an especially “spiritual” person, and his dementia was declining, so I assumed that he would passively listen to the Scripture reading. I was wrong. I read to him Psalm 23, and he recited almost perfectly, Psalm 23 in the King James. We prayed and then he looked me square in the eye and said, “Come often. Come visit me all the time if you want! I’m not telling you that you *have* to visit me, but I would like you to visit me. I receive you.”

I started to cry. I knew that Howard and I had a special connection, but it was not our connection he was responding to; it was *Jesus* he was responding to. He heard the voice of his shepherd, causing him to lie down in green pastures, leading him beside the still waters, and restoring his soul (Ps 23:2 – 3a). He had heard his Savior, the gate of salvation. His heart knew that he had heard Jesus, despite his unclear and distorted thoughts.

Jesus Christ comes to you too, speaking words of love. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28 – 30).

St. Timothy’s Lutheran Church: May we go out in the love of Jesus, directing others to the true gate, Jesus Christ. Amen.