

## **Double-Action Gate**

John 10:1-10

April 13, 2008

Sermon preached by Rev. Donald Ng at the First Chinese Baptist Church in San Francisco.

With the famous Golden Gate Bridge serving as the prominent image that defines San Francisco, the word, “gate” is used frequently in the Bay Area. Golden Gate Disposal picks up our church trash. We picnic at Golden Gate Park. The best egg custards can be purchased at Golden Gate Bakery on Grant Avenue. In Sausalito, we have Gateway Shopping Center.

I have been paying attention to gates recently. Different gates send different messages. Some gates are perpetually open, only closed when something inside the gate needs to be kept inside temporarily—a dog or a child. Sage plays in a local playground that has a gate to come inside but then there’s another gate to the “small kids” section where the big kids are not to play. Other gates are perpetually closed, only open for a few seconds to let in what is to be protected from what’s outside.

Some gates are attached to fences, the access point between what is in and what is out, a breach in the security of the fence, but one that can fill the gap momentarily. It’s like the 640 miles of fence that our government wants to build to separate America from Mexico. The only legal gate is through the Department of Immigration.

Amazingly, there are even gates that have no fences. This is the kind of gate that I’ve been looking at. There could stand at the entrance of our walk, a gateway with no lock, no fence attached. It’s not intended to keep any criminals out. Sometimes, it seems, gates are simply for decoration.

### **Jesus the Gate**

Jesus, however, is not a decorative gate. As gates go, Jesus is an odd choice compared to what we just talked about, but he is not decoration. He describes the role of the gate clearly—it’s the entrance to safety, the threshold between security and threat, and the place of division between what should be let in and what should be kept out. He says, “I am the gate.”

Jesus is the barrier between the thieves who want to steal, kill, and destroy his hapless sheep. They need his protection from those who would bring harm, destruction, even death.

Our lesson for this morning is set within a larger context that is established in chapter 9. In that chapter, Jesus heals a man who was born blind from birth. The healing is received with opposition, especially from the Pharisees. In his claim to be the gate, Jesus is setting the Pharisees up as the thieves and bandits and that he is the good shepherd.

Whether the thieves and bandits are Pharisees, false prophets, doubters, or anyone who endanger God’s people, Jesus’ point is clear: beware of those outside the gate who would call you away from the gate that leads to abundant life. More pointedly: get inside the gate before you die to something that is not God.

This passage is not only about Jesus being the Good Shepherd but also about Jesus being the gate. I always saw the gatekeeper as a bouncer who keeps people out. But Jesus the gatekeeper is one who sleeps across the doorway to keep the sheep safe. The gate is to protect the sheep from wandering off and doing themselves harm.

### **We are Not the Gate**

Many of us moderns are uncomfortable with gate imagery because we know that when the gate is closed something or someone is excluded. In this case, the some one is the thief or the bandit, the one who is not of Jesus' fold. Even moderns like us don't want the thief in, but we also do not want any mistaken judgments, any rash decisions, or any of "ours" left out there. We want there to be time for change, mercy for those who are not yet convinced to change, and forgiveness for how we might have been a stumbling block to change.

All of which reveals that, as usual, we have made the passage more about us than about Jesus. We act as if we are the gate or have the ability to grant who may enter the gate and who may not. A more faithful reading of this text gives those decisions to the One who claims that he, alone, is the gate and that we remain sheep who must dependently follow the voice that calls us by name and no other voice.

Following that voice exclusively is a tremendous challenge when we live in a society of many options. Everyday more options are created that destroy the spirit and harm our healthy lives. We rush to accumulate more material goods even when we don't need them thinking that they will give us new pleasure and status. We feast on heaps of food while at the same time try to diet. And when one thing doesn't live up to its promises, we move on to the next new fad. We become something less than God's sheep as we listen for any voice that we might follow.

Sheep will not do that, as our passage says. Sheep focus only on the voice they have come to trust; his is the only voice they will follow. When we are drawn to any voice out there, we prove ourselves to be less than sheep. When we provide an alternate voice than that of the Shepherd's, a voice that leads to death rather than life, we prove ourselves among the thieves and the bandits.

But there is a gate, Jesus, the one who offers abundant life. He is the threshold, the one who lies across the gate where you can enter into the safety and peace of a life protected from those who would steal, destroy and kill. Those who enter this gate find pasture, the eternal promise of having lived on earth.

### **Double-Action Gate**

While we appreciate Jesus' promise to give us pasture and protection in eternal life, we are still in this world and, at times, seemingly unprotected, unfed, and at the mercy of those who would lead us astray or kill us. What is a sheep, even one who listens carefully, to do?

Our task is challenging, while ultimately, we are within the gate's protection, yet for now, vulnerable to thieves and bandits. We would be fooling ourselves that as long as we are inside these four walls, we are fully protected from the world filled with thieves, bandits, and death. Eventually, we must go outside into this world. It is not our task to abandon the world. Therefore, we will face these temptations and encounter these thieves and bandits. When we do, it is as sheep that belongs to a flock secured by an eternal gate.

But notice verse 9 in our passage for today, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." When we listen to Jesus' calling, we are saved and will find pasture. The point is that we go out and we come in, even when we are saved.

Good pastureland is not always predictable. Not even the shepherd can predict where it may be, even after years of experience. So the flock keeps moving, according to the shepherd's best wisdom. It goes in and out of the gate every day. The gate marks a boundary between the place to graze and a place to

rest. It is part of the daily-ness of life. Inside the gate, you gather together at the end of the day. Outside the gate, you move on to green pastures and still waters. The rhythm of in and out is necessary to life, because the green pastures are outside the gate. A sheep that flat-out refuses to go out will die. Likewise, a sheep that flat-out refuses to come in, when the call comes, may soon be lost in the night.

Jesus the gate is like a “double-action” gate. We have all seen those saloon or café doors that have “double-action springs hinges” that allow the door to open in both directions. We are saved when we come in and go out through a double-action gate.

The saving is in the going out and the coming in. The way to save the life of a sheep is not to drag it through the gate, once and for all. The way to save the life of a sheep is to know when it is time to go out and when it is time to come back in. So the sheep depend on the voice of the shepherd, to tell them what time it is. Is it grazing time, moving time? Then out you go. Is it gathering-in time, resting time? Then come back in. Listen for the voice of your Shepherd, the voice you recognize above all others, and follow that call.

### **Outside the Gate**

Most of the time, we think about gates as to whom to let in and who to keep out. Unless you have a token or a BART ticket, you can't ride the subway. Unless you have a green card or some kind of valid identification, you can't cross the border. Unless you have \$5.00, you can't cross the Golden Gate Bridge to come into San Francisco. Sometimes even at church, unless you fit in with the appropriate background and credentials, you are not welcome. The church marks a boundary between the saved and the not saved. We are in; they are out.

But Jesus said, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

We do quite well in the “coming in” part, but we can do better in the “going out” part. Out there, beyond the gate is where we will find green pasture.

I have been sharing an idea with the Deacons and with other religious leaders in Chinatown about creating “Good Neighbors Zones.” As our membership increasingly become comprised of people from the greater Bay Area, I wonder who are the people who live in the apartments across the street from us. I see their laundry hanging out on the windows from my office upstairs. I wonder who are the shopkeepers and workers who keep up their businesses for mainly tourists from around the world. These men, women, and children live day to day in the shadows of our church, but most of us including me, don't know who they are.

I have proposed to the other religious leaders in Chinatown that what would happen if each of our houses of worship would to draw a one-block radius from our buildings and begin to meet our neighbors. Some may welcome us in while others might keep their doors locked tight. Some might wonder if we have something to sell while others might be suspicious of our intentions. Somehow, the whole concept of being “good neighbors” is missing from our contemporary vocabulary.

We don't know what to expect. It may very well be a huge flop. But the point is to follow Jesus' call—to go out to find pasture. Imagine the change that will happen to us when we do this! Going as two's, one English-speaking, one Cantonese-speaking, we would venture outside the gate and into the green pasture of sharing our faith and our good neighborly kindness will transform us to be faithful people. By experiencing what is outside, we are changed inside. It's a double-action spring gate!

It's why I want to at least walk the Bay to Breakers this year. On a Sunday morning, I want to go out into the city and see what's out there. Why aren't these people in church anyway? We might just have to go out to where they are to welcome them in.

### **Jesus the Gate**

As gates go, Jesus is a double-action gate. If he keeps any out, it's those that everyone thought were locked in—the religious leaders, the chief priests. If he keeps any in, it's those that everyone assumed couldn't get in—the Samaritan woman, the Roman official, the tax collector.

But as strange as his choices are about who gets in to be his flock and who is kept out, that he lets us come and go is even stranger. Shouldn't he just lock us in before the thieves and bandits get us? Shouldn't he hold us tightly before we're lured away by yet another voice?

It turns out that the gate, Jesus, represents more than a barrier, he's a threshold, a passage to new life that requires a double-action commitment. Jesus knows that ever since we crossed into the gate, ever since he claimed us, we are changed. Who we were before we came to the gate and who we are since we entered are not the same people. Yes, we remain imperfect, subject to temptation, and continue to disobey, but we are not the same persons we were before we entered the gate. Everything has changed.

And because we are changed, the double-action gate of Jesus Christ no longer needs to lock us in. We no longer need to stay inside the fence. Rather, assured that the gate has claimed us, we are free to live both in God's promise of eternal life and to serve this world today. When we are coming in and when we going out, we are not so much choosing to put ourselves at risk of destruction, as we are putting the destroyers at risk of coming to the gate. All those thieves and bandits may very well become a part of Jesus' flock at the end.

By following Jesus the double-action gate, we are disciples discovering the abundant life confident in God's love and service in the world. Jesus is the gate who enables us to worship God and to be secure in our service to the world in God's name. There is no other double-action gate to abundant life as in Jesus!

Let us pray.

Jesus, in you we find rest and our restoration. It is, therefore, tempting to become complacent in you, to claim the safety of your gift of abundant life, while withdrawing from a destructive world. Give us confidence, Lord, that our place within you is secure, so that we might be empowered to go out into the world as we have come in hungering for such security. Help us to trust you and to know Jesus Christ as the double action gate. Amen.