

## **ST. TIMOTHY'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Signal Mountain, Tennessee

The Fourth Sunday after Easter (A) / April 13, 2008

The Rev. George L. Choyce

Typically a gate has a negative connotation. Who hasn't come across a wrought iron gate with a forbidding "Keep Out" or a snooty "Members Only" sign affixed to it? Those kinds of gates mean stay away; stay out; you do not belong here; we do not want you with us.

The gospel understanding of gate, however, is not the same as our definition of gate. It's a complete 180. In John's gospel, for example, Jesus says, "I am the gate." His first hearers would have been perplexed to listen to Jesus describe himself as the opening to the sheepfold. I think that this is a case when we are just as perplexed because this Sunday has always been known as "Good Shepherd Sunday." I think people from the original hearers all the way to us intuitively grasp the Good Shepherd image for Jesus. The gate, after all, is just a gate. The gate is just the way in and out of the sheepfold. Jesus the gate does not have the "feel good" impact that Jesus as the Good Shepherd does.

This Sunday I would like to explore the image of Jesus as the gate of the sheepfold. Jesus said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." I have never really liked the fact that this is the text for the fourth Sunday after Easter. There's nothing wrong with the gospel text; rather, it is the placement that is difficult. At first glance, this is a text that takes us backwards. It does not have linear logic.

For instance, our seminarian Michael preached the Sunday after Easter on Jesus' appearance to the disciples and then to Thomas. That makes chronological sense. Kathryn+ preached last week about Jesus' appearance to Cleopas and his companion on the road

to Emmaus. That too makes sequential sense. These are both clearly post resurrection stories. But this week we are thrown a proverbial curve ball and are back at chapter ten of John's gospel.

As I said earlier, I have never really understood this backwards placement of this text until I was looking around my office for some inspiration that would jump out at me. Ok, ok that's preacher's code to mean that I was getting desperate. Even my fishing pictures didn't do the trick! My eyes continued to rove the walls, bookshelves, tables, and desk. It was then that I came across a watercolor picture. It is entitled "The Narrow Gate" and was painted by our own Dave Mathewson.

Though titled "The Narrow Gate" it is not so much of a gate. Instead it is a painting of two crosses. Let me describe it to you. One cross is rough and wooden splattered in deep red blood stains lying on the ground. The other cross is glorious and upright, built with sturdy stone with a narrow gate in the center of it. Through the narrow gate in the center of that cross one can see glorious green pasture on the other side.

I think that image of the empty cross as the gate makes it particularly appropriate in the season of Easter. The narrow gate has been flung wide open by not only the death of but also by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus has broken open any barriers that prevent anyone from entering into the sheepfold of salvation and going out to feed in rich pastures.

The gate is the cross; the cross is the gate. Salvation is opened up to any and all through the cross. Listen to this profound truth in one of the best prayers from Morning Prayer. Let's read it together on page 101 of The Book of Common Prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hardwood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our

hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. Amen.”

Can you hear the echoes in this prayer from the words of Jesus, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”? Let’s hear it again - *That everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace* is echoed by *whoever enters by me will be saved...*

“Whoever” and “everyone” are loaded words. They mean that the flock of the followers of Jesus is “whoever” and is “everyone.” “Whoever” can mean sheep who talk different. And here I’m not just referring to those people who move to Signal Mountain from north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Also, “everyone” can mean sheep that look different, with different customs. But all the differences mean nothing, nothing at all since all of the sheep entered the **same** way through the **same** gate.

Our sign outside expresses our Jesus-gate belief - “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You.” That means according to the prayer, “everyone.” That means according to Jesus, “whoever.” Everyone and whoever are welcome here. Our sign may be a bit rusty and weather-worn, but that sign proclaims this timeless truth - the gate is open and the doors are open to all sorts of sheep who wander in to become a part of the flock. The entrance to the church then is not through the circumstance of lineage nor is it by privilege of socio-economics. The entrance is via the gate, the cross of Christ, Jesus himself.

There is a personal application part to all of this. Once you come in through the gate of the cross, you are a part of something that is bigger than just one individual. We have the strength of one another (flock); we have the strength of the cross (gate). So when you as a single person are criticized, or scared, or intimidated, or depressed, you are not alone. You have the flock and you have

entered through the gate. There are others in the flock that can help. And certainly Jesus the gate knows what it is to be in pain.

There's something else to think about. When any of us begin to badmouth other members of the flock, we need to be humbled that they came in through the very same gate as we did. They are also a sheep for whom Jesus was willing to die.

This, I believe, is a crucial understanding for the flock. We all came in through the same gate of the cross. In addition to this we all go out to feed through the same gate of the cross. The flock gathers together to feed in rich pasture. It is heavenly food that we dine on. At this table, the bread (the body) is broken and given for us to feed on. It is heavenly drink that we consume. The wine (the blood) is poured and given for us to drink. It is through the gate of the cross that all of us enter into this heavenly pasture. "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture."