

“I AM the Gate for the Sheep”

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¹“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.”

⁶Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”
(John 10:1-10)

My first job out of college was on Capitol Hill. I served as a low-level aide on the staff of the US Senate Committee on the Judiciary, which has responsibility for legislation that affects the federal judicial branch, and is also responsible for hearings related to the appointment of federal judges – advising the full Senate with recommendations for or against confirmation. Less than a week before I started, the first President Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to be an associate justice of the Supreme Court. So things were busy right from the get-go.

Like I said, I was a low-level aide. Staffers with much more seniority and experience were doing the heavy lifting on that confirmation hearing. But one of the things I was asked to do was to stand at the door of what is now known as the Kennedy Caucus Room to help regulate people coming in and out of the hearing. That included witnesses who had been invited to testify, dignitaries or people who had special invitations from senators, and of course members of the public who were interested and just wanted to watch. In short, I was a guy with a clipboard, deciding who got in and who didn't. Don't get it wrong – my responsibility was much more about keeping seats filled and managing the line outside, but still – when you are the one holding the clipboard – there is some authority there... there is just enough power for it to maybe go to your head.

One evening the hearing had gone late. It was probably 6 or 7 in the evening. This was before the more explosive aspects of that hearing, and things were actually very quiet. I was alone outside the door to the caucus room. About then a woman in a red pantsuit came around the corner and walked toward the door. Unfortunately for her, I had just received a high-level intel briefing that all the chairs were full. “I'm sorry, ma'am,” I said. “The room is full. You will need to wait until someone comes out before you can go in.”

I have to tell you, that felt great. Big time, important stuff was going on behind those big wooden doors, and I alone was standing post at the gates of freedom, making the world safe for democracy. Interesting thing, though... there was something vaguely familiar about this woman in the red pantsuit...



Seriously though, these are the kinds of images that might come to mind when we hear Jesus say “I am the gate for the sheep.” Gates and doors mark important boundaries, and throughout human history, the most important ones have had gatekeepers. Gatekeepers enforce decisions about who is in and who is out... who is welcomed and who is rejected. In Greek mythology, the mystical figure Charon stood guard at the River Styx to greet the dead and to ferry those who could pay the toll over the dark water into the Underworld. On the other side, Cerberus, a fearsome multi-headed dog, stood guard at the boundary to prevent the dead from escaping back over to the land of the living. For the Romans, it was Janus, the god of gates and doorways, who stood guard at the boundary. In times of war, the doors of his temple in the Roman Forum were kept open until hostilities ended, when their closure represented the dawn of peace. In mythology, and in life, gates have gatekeepers.

In the days of Jesus, shepherds who grazed their flocks out in the countryside would cobble together rustic enclosures with whatever materials they could find – walls made with a logs, sticks, and stacked rocks. If they were lucky, they found a small cave. But there were no hinged doors or swinging gates. Instead, when darkness fell, shepherds would lay down across the opening of the enclosure so that anything that wanted in or out would have to go through them. They stayed put, all night, keeping watch. The shepherd’s body was, literally, the gate.

Still, the symbolism is a bit more complex than that. A door or a gate can be a good or bad thing, depending on the circumstances, and depending on which side of it we are on. A door can keep dangerous threats outside, but some doors also limit freedom and keep people trapped inside. A gate can also block people out who should be allowed to come in. Safe houses have gates, but so do prisons. Safe pastures for sheep have gates, but so do closed communities and private clubs.

Jesus, however, is a different kind of gate, and a different kind of gatekeeper. This gate does not have a tricky combination or a secret code that we have to prove we know. This gate swings wide with just the slightest push. This door is held open for us by the One who says *"Seek this gate and you will find it. Knock and the door will be opened for you."*¹

And, as a gatekeeper, Jesus is not an absentee landlord with a lock and key. He is a steadfast advocate and defender who is always present with His sheep. When the lambs are away from shelter, the Good Shepherd will remain outside with them — to console them, defend them, and find safety somewhere else. When it is time to go home, Jesus will guide the sheep to safety and then place his own body between them and danger.

Nor is Jesus a bouncer with a clipboard. He demands no payment for access to his safety. His primary task is not to check credentials, cleanliness, or worthiness. His desire is not to blame or chastise the sheep, but to welcome them inside with love and joy. No, this is no ordinary gatekeeper. This is the Good Shepherd. He knows his sheep by name and they know his voice instinctively. They trust in him completely, for they know that, if bandits or wolves come near, he will gladly offer his body as a barrier, and, if necessary, gladly lay down his own life for his sheep. As both Gate and Gatekeeper, Christ acts only in grace, only in mercy and only with love.

The two of us were not alone for long, standing there outside the big wooden doors of the Senate Caucus Room. The sounds of approaching footsteps echoed down the marble

¹ Matthew 7:7.

hallway, and a short whirlwind of a woman wheeled around the corner and headed straight for the door. Her name didn't come to me, but I recognized her immediately as one of the senior staff members for Senator Ted Kennedy, the ranking Democrat on the committee. She had a reputation for moving fast and getting right to the point, and I knew my meager clipboard held no sway over her. I stepped away from the door, for as they say, discretion is the better part of valor.

Just before she reached for the knob, she happened to catch sight of the woman in red, who had been patiently and graciously waiting nearby. The senior staffer stopped cold in her tracks. "Caroline!" she said. "What are you doing waiting out here? Your uncle is expecting you."

In that instant, it all became clear. Of course the woman in red had looked vaguely familiar to me, because the person my clipboard and I had barred was Caroline Kennedy -- who, I might add, never uttered a complaining word... never said "Don't you know who I am?" ... never even got an annoyed look on her face.

It all goes to show that we humans have always been very flawed and imperfect gatekeepers. I have sometimes asked myself, had I actually recognized Caroline Kennedy in that moment, would I have let her in, even though my instructions were clear and I knew all the seats were full? Probably. Would that have been right or wrong? Hard to say.

But I can say this: when we find ourselves standing at some door, or holding the latch to some kind of gate, our vision and judgment always has been and always will be clouded by human weakness, prejudice, and sin. We make self-serving judgments about who should be allowed in and who should be kept out. We create faulty hierarchies of who is more important and who is not important at all. We demonize people and glorify people using metrics that are polluted with hurt and anger and selfish pride. In board rooms and classrooms... at border crossings and in hospital waiting rooms... in conversations about ethnicity and gender and the way we think our government should operate... we as human beings make so many bad and broken decisions when we have our hands on the latch, when we are the ones who get to decide whether to open the door or slam it shut.

Thanks be to heaven, that when it comes to the welcome we receive from God, when we need the protection of the Good Shepherd in times of crisis, that the only One standing between us and safety is Jesus Christ himself. He has no clipboard in his hand. He expects no payment from us. With grace, hope, and love, all he says is "*Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*"²

Thanks be to God that Jesus Christ is both the Gate and the Gatekeeper. **Amen.**

² Matthew 11:28.