

Sometimes Jesus mixes his metaphors.

That happens in today's gospel reading. He starts off by talking about the legitimate shepherd who comes through the gate in contrast to thieves and bandits who come over the wall. The sheep recognize the voice of their shepherd and will follow him. But those who were listening did not understand what he meant, so he tried again. Not by saying "I am the Good Shepherd" – that comes a little later, but by saying "I am the Gate"

'I am the Gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

The gate protects the sheep from predators because without one the wolves, thieves and bandits could just walk in. Jesus is the gate who lets the sheep come in and go out. There is a Greek idiom to "come in and go out" that refers to living among or in relationship with a community of some kind. So I think we can argue that Jesus is referring to the nascent Christian community.

To say that he is the gate, and has come to give abundant life, is very similar to that more familiar I am statement, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

To those of us who have enrolled in the reign of God, who identify as the sheep of his flock, these are comforting images but they also have a shadow side. The shadow comes whenever we separate one group of people and give them special privileges; and whenever we start to think that we are somehow better than others.

Unfortunately this shadow is woven into our social fabric. The European culture that came to this land and developed it and created the civilization that we now think of as America, did so over the dead bodies of the people who already lived here. The fifteenth century \*Doctrine of Discovery gave church sanction to Europeans claiming land which was

inhabited by non-Christians was now their and treating the people as sub-human. And so as we know, in this land the indigenous people were subjugated and treated cruelly. Here in California in 1853, the governor declared extermination of all Indians and gave hunters a bounty for Indian scalps.

It is horrifying. As horrifying as the institution of slavery and the cruel treatment of African American slaves.

But it is not something that is in the past. Indigenous people are still treated as less than whites: one example, 1.4% of all Americans do not have electricity in their homes, but 14.2% of Native American homes are without electricity, most of those are in Navajoland.<sup>1</sup> And our educational system is failing them as well – Native American students are more 237% more likely to drop out of school and 207% more likely to be expelled than their white counterparts.<sup>2</sup>

And white culture continues to perpetuate the myth that we are somehow better. White Supremacy is not dead. And it is supported by \*Christian Nationalism – a strange ideology which distorts Christian thinking and ties it in with a patriotism which says that this country was intended by God to be specially set apart and that Christianity should be privileged by the state. It implies that to be a good American one must be a Christian, and often provides cover for racist attitudes and gun violence.

I don't for a moment think that this was what Jesus intended. And I think it must grieve the heart of God.

The reading from Acts gives us a very different picture of the early believers. This was not a community which found its identity through exclusion but in the worship of God. It sounds to me as though they

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2016/01/f29/38\\_nuta\\_denetclaw\\_ahasteen.pdf](https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2016/01/f29/38_nuta_denetclaw_ahasteen.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncsl.org/quad-caucus/striving-to-achieve#:~:text=The%20state%20of%20education%20in,be%20expelled%20than%20white%20students.>

lived the values of hospitality. The gate of their sheepfold was open to all who came with goodwill.

We know from later writings that as things developed it got a lot more complicated and the early church wrestled with whether you could be a Christian without also becoming a Jew; and how Gentiles and Jews could be part of the same sheepfold; and of course, whether women were really equal and could speak up in church.

So if Jesus is Gate, Way, Truth and Life through whom one has to pass to come to the Father, Mother, Creator, how can that not be exclusive?

Actually, I think Jesus did mean to be somewhat exclusionary because the Gospel reading is as much a warning against thieves and bandits as it is a statement about Jesus the Christ. As the gate Jesus could and would exclude those who were trying to get something just for themselves, those who were distorting the message of God's love for their own gain.

But the invitation is open to all.

We come unstuck when we take it all too literally. "I am the Gate." "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6) Do you really think that Jesus was a gate? No. So why do we assume that a few chapters later Jesus is speaking literally? In John's gospel, Jesus is proclaimed as Word and Christ in the opening verses, and when he says "I am" he is invoking that amazing meeting between Moses and God at the burning bush when God says "I am who I am". Jesus is implying that he is one with Yahweh the great Creator God.

So when Jesus says "I am..." he is claiming his oneness with the Christ and placing the conversation into a mystical realm which is beyond and above and within the nuts and bolts of this world. However we humans come to God, however we rediscover our deep relationship with Oneness, the Christ is involved – the Christ who is the be all and end all

of Creation, the Alpha and Omega, who brings together earth and heaven.

It is the Christ who is the gate, the way, the truth, the life. It is the Christ who came in Jesus to fulfil the mission of reconciling earth and heaven. And it is the Christ who meets us in the written word and in the sacraments.

There has been a situation here in Los Osos which has caused me sadness and some soul searching. A group of people planned to hold a workshop at South Bay Community Center, a workshop to teach people who wanted to learn, how to have kinky sex safely and consensually. They had planned it carefully with the space and the community in mind, and the South Bay Community Center board had agreed to rent the space to them on that basis.

But some of our neighbors became very upset and believed that in some way “those people” threatened the community, that somehow kinky sex would leak out the doors of the community center and threaten children playing in the playground. Some of those who complained even seemed to think that any kind of unusual behavior in the bedroom is equivalent to pedophilia. And so the event was cancelled.

My soul searching comes from the fact that though I read the angry and hateful comments I did not speak up. I could not find the words and perhaps I was a little afraid to have the mob turn on me. My sadness comes from how quickly people rushed to judgment without having full information and how quickly they assumed that the Community Center board was stupid.

God gave us bodies to be enjoyed. We use them to relate to each other. And we enjoy them in different ways. Some people enjoy roller coasters and skydiving. I do not. I prefer hiking and kayaking. The way we express our intimate relationships with our bodies will also be different.

I am no better in my enjoyment of birding than my friend who loves loud concerts. We are all God's children, we are all invited to be the sheep of God's own flock.

You and I are not the gate. We do not get to define who is in and who is out. We are not superior because of the color of our skin or because of our ethnic heritage or our educational attainment. God loves each one of us equally.

St. Benedict's has always understood that Christian community is intended to be inclusive, that anybody who seeks God's face is welcome among us. And we also understand that we get to extend that hospitality beyond the walls of the church, moving in the community as messengers of God's love, both individually and through the Abundance Shop, Community Dinner, Laundry Love, People's Kitchen, Los Osos Cares and the work of our Discovery Team.

Next Saturday at 10am, Deacon Jen and I will be at South Bay Community Park at a Community for All Rally with others who are standing against the quality of hate that was displayed against the organizers of the kink workshop. I hope that you might consider joining us.

Because we need to stand up against hatred masquerading as holiness; we need to stand up against the thieves and bandits who distort the words of Jesus for their own ends. Because through Jesus the Christ comes healing and the reconciliation of God and humanity. Because we are the sheep of his pasture, and we follow the example and the teaching of the one who said, "I am the Gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."