

Reading the Gospel of John, one quickly comes upon the "I AM" sayings of Jesus. Jesus refers to himself with a different metaphor over and over again. One can translate God's self revelation in Exodus "I am who I am." Or one can translate it "I will be who I will be." Jesus identifies himself – I am The Bread of Life, The Light of the World, The Good Shepherd, The Resurrection and the Life, The Way, The Truth and The Life, The Vine – and now Jesus says "I am the Gate."
Jesus will be "Who He Will Be!"

Looking at the "I Am" sayings, there is a common thread that holds them together. All of the "I Am" sayings are common elements of life. Bread. Light, Shepherd, Vine, Gate. These images are all well known to the hearers. They are things they live with every day – they are the stuff of common life. When Jesus uses any of these words, the hearers know what he is talking about. And they know the function of each item. Bread and light give and sustain life. A Shepherd and a gate guard and protect the life of the sheep. Branches depend on vines for life. In each "I AM" saying, Jesus is giving examples of life-giving and life-sustaining items.

Another common thread is that Jesus is telling the people that he has come to bring life. The presence of God in Jesus is not something in the future. It is a present reality. So John uses these common items in every day life to speak of God's presence among them. In other words, the Christian faith is not a roadmap to heaven- something that happens in the future. It is a call to live life in a way that brings life to not only ourselves, but to others.

Our text today follows the story of the man born blind and Jesus healing him. The story is not just another miracle story. It is a story about the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees. In saying he is the Gate, Jesus is most likely reminding the people that the Pharisees are like the thieves and robbers in this story for today. Jesus had already gone to great length to describe himself as the Good Shepherd. Anyone familiar with the work of a shepherd would know the importance of the sheep gate. The gate is the entrance to this safe place where several shepherds might put their sheep for the night. The Gate kept the sheep from danger.

Do you pay attention to gates? There are all kinds of gates. For example, the gate to the Japanese Gardens at Botanical Gardens is just a decorative gate. There is no way to close or open it. It is open all the time and marks the entrance to the garden. That is very different from the gates at the maximum security prison in Atlanta. The minimum sentence in the prison was 20 years. When our softball team from the theology school went to the prison to play the prison team, we went through this gate. We were in a room and had to leave anything we had in our pockets plus watches, any jewelry we were wearing. We went through another gate or two, then we went through this big gate. Past it we were in this huge outdoor yard with several thousand prisoners and a very few guards. Those gates were to keep people in. They did keep others out, but basically, they kept the prisoners in!!

I think many of us in modern culture are uncomfortable with the gate imagery because we know that when a gate is closed that it is intended to exclude someone. I get a little uncomfortable with gated communities that shelter themselves from the larger community. I want to have a high regard for the early hermits that wanted to keep themselves free from the temptations and sins of the world.

They went out to live by themselves – away from temptation. If the purpose of religion is to stay away from temptation, then maybe that works. I am not sure. I do know that when Jesus prayed for the church, his prayer was not for God to take the disciples out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one.

The sheep gate was to keep the sheep away from thieves and bandits. Maybe in that day, Jesus saw the Pharisees, the religious establishment as those who led people away from God. Who would we identify as thieves and bandits today? Who or what is it that we need a gate that keeps us safe?

You can make your own list. Maybe it would be drug dealers. Maybe it would be advertisers who take our money and our way of living from us. Maybe it would be those who want to solve our differences in the world through military power. Maybe it would be those who think they are the only ones right and exclude everyone else. The Sheep Gate is supposed to keep sheep in a safe place. There is a great line in the movie, BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN. The two main characters have taken the sheep up in the mountains for the summer to find good grazing. They are not cooks – eat most all their food out of cans heated on the fire. Finally, one of them says, "I think we

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out to kill one of the sheep. We can't live off this food all summer." The other person replied that he did not think that was a good idea.

"We were sent up here to watch the sheep, not eat them."

I do like the idea of a safe place for sheep and for people. I like a safe place to shop. I would like a safe place for people to live. I would like a safe school for all our students.

Jesus says, "I am the Gate – and it leads to life. I like it that our church put a full page ad in the USA Today on Friday inviting us to have a conversation about race. That will happen on May 18 and we will be a part of that discussion. I like it that Pilgrim is Open and Affirming – that we are an accepting place for gays and lesbians. I like our slogan – "Whoever you are, Where ever you are on life's journey, You are welcome here. I believe that Jesus was talking about a gate that is open to everyone.

Gates do a lot of things. Some keep us in. It opens to welcome those who need to find shelter and safety. Some gates keep others out. Some gates mark a transition in our lives. Gates can be a point of demarcation where what we were, is no longer who we are or what we shall be.

Another thing about a gate – it usually opens both ways. It opens to let people in, and it opens to let people out. I think of Jesus, the gate, as more than a barrier. Jesus, the Gate, is a threshold, a passage way to a new life. We are not the same people we were before we entered this gate called Pilgrim. I don't think we are perfect people. But we don't use church as a gate to lock us in, to protect us. We are called to go into the world as the People of God – knowing that God brings life to all. We ourselves become a gate for others.