

The Gate

Something some of you may not know and something many of you do know is that our readings each Sunday are not plucked out of the blue by your's truly.

Instead, we follow the Revised Common Lectionary, so that in most churches on most Sundays, no matter if you are Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Methodist or Presbyterian, you will hear the very same readings each week.

On the plus side we will hear, almost in their entirety, each of the four gospels every three years, as well as good portions of the Older Testament and the various letters of the apostles.

The downside, though, can happen on days like today, when the gospel lesson we hear is actually the ending part of a much longer whole ... one we wrestled with several weeks ago in Lent.

While today's gospel talks about gates and sheep and voices, it's really the ending part of the story of Jesus coming upon that blind man, the man who was born blind, a circumstance which causes the disciples to ask: "Who sinned, he or his parents?"; leading Jesus to reply, (and I quote, nearly verbatim):

"Neither he nor his parents sinned, and get this through your thick heads: Stop judging people! God is not about cause and effect, instead this man's condition will teach the whole world something about God.

And so you remember how Jesus teaches the whole world something about God as he reenacts creation itself, how he makes mud out of dirt and spit, and placing it on the man's eyes, gives him new eyes: because to be in the presence of Jesus is to be in the presence of God — and to be in the presence of God is to take a seat right in the midst of creation; in the very midst of life; right in front of that which is always making old things new.

Which really upsets the religious stormtroopers who want the security of rules and simple answers and most of all obedience to the structures they so lovingly and carefully maintain.

The religious stormtroopers go nuts when they come face to face with this now formerly blind man and throw him out of the club, that is, the Temple, and follow that throwing out by insisting that Jesus himself is the worst kind of muckraking, devil loving, rule breaking, troublemaker they've ever encountered.

I review all of this drama with you since it's right after all of this that we end up where we are this morning.

The crowd Jesus is talking to is this very group of outraged pious folks who are beside themselves that Jesus has the temerity to allow a blind man to see.

It's at this point that Jesus starts talking about sheep and gates and voices.

On the one hand, this is all pretty familiar territory.

After all, who hasn't seen a picture of Jesus as the good shepherd and who hasn't sat through endless homilies of the people of God as sheep?

And yet, when you sit with what he's saying, when you read it again a few times, when you stew with it for awhile, well, maybe you'll find yourself lined up with those who first heard these words from Jesus: "but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

In the other three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus often goes off into parables, "parable" being another word for a "riddle."

Like how the kingdom of God is like that woman who loses then finds a coin, or like a pearl that this fellow stumbles across and sells all he has to get it; or like 10 bridesmaids, some who bring enough oil, some who don't; or like three men given various amounts of money by the bossman before he heads off on a long vacation; or like a farmer throwing seeds with abandon.....

Stories that may seem obvious on the surface, but the stories become riddles when you poke a little deeper, and the more you poke the deeper you go —

In John's gospel, the parables, the riddles, don't come in the form of stories, they come in how Jesus refers to himself.

As in: "I am the bread of life; I am the living water; I am the good shepherd; I am the gate."

Is it any wonder that "they did not understand what he was saying to them?"

And because we so often seem to stay on the surface of these riddles, taking from them what seems easiest to get, we've made some pretty good misuse of these riddles over the years, like, insisting that if you ain't Christian, you're doomed, and using these riddles to create insiders and outsiders, winners and losers, the saved and the damned.

In other words, we too often use the riddles of Jesus to create new categories of good and evil, new categories of right and the wrong, and we have done much violence to each other and to our brothers and sisters far and near, precisely because we have not poked even a little below the surface.

But scratch at it a little, poke at it a little, and our easy explanations for what Jesus is getting at begin to fall apart.

So what are we to make of these "I am" sayings of Jesus that appear only in the gospel of John?

"I am", as you know, is God's name.

Moses implores the voice coming from that burning wilderness bush: "Tell me your name!"

To which the voice responds: "I am."

"Tell your people I am sending you, because I've heard their suffering groans!"

So when Jesus refers to himself in John's gospel as "I am" — the bread, the living water, the good shepherd, and the very entry point, yes, the very gate of God; Jesus is saying about himself what Paul has been telling us all along about him: that Jesus and God are one and the same, that when we are in the presence of Jesus, we are in the presence of God, and that because God is the sustainer of all life, the provider of all nourishment, the source of all light and life and love and gentleness and healing and comfort and joy, well then, God is here among us to bring to completion not the chosen few, not the select and the holy, but the whole of creation, which happily includes each and every human being.

As in: "When I am lifted up, I will draw all things to myself."

As in: "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son not to condemn the world but to save it."

And God does this wonderful thing by becoming the very thing that is the heart of our problem:

"God made him who knew no sin to become sin on our behalf so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." 2 Cor 5:21.

In other words, Jesus takes back from us what our first father and mother stole from the garden: the power to tell good from evil, our original sin, and Jesus replaces this power with the power of faith in Jesus.

Got it?

Can I sit down now?

Perhaps I might elaborate.

By becoming sin for us, Jesus willingly takes back the very thing that caused our separation from God in the first place: our insistence on saying what is right and what is wrong, and replacing that which we are incapable of possessing with faith in Jesus.

Determining what is good and what is evil was our undoing because in our insistence on defining what is good and what is evil, we fail to recognize our own innate brokenness, our own blindness, our own limited, stunted, miniaturized vision of the who and what and wherefore of God: which takes us to the very root of sin as St. John understands it: sin is our failure to see in Jesus the face and character and heart of the Living God, and our failure to give ourselves over to that truth.

The opposite of sin is NOT following the rules by walking the straight and narrow.

The opposite of sin is faith in Jesus.

The opposite of sin is faith in Jesus.

That doesn't mean walking around beating folks over the head with our limited, partial, inadequate views of who and what Jesus is; that's what gets the Pharisees in such hot water today: claiming to see so much more than they actually do, and thus remaining blind to God's actual work in the world.

That the opposite of sin is faith in Jesus might mean lining up our lives with this preacher from Galilee who welcomes the outcast, who remakes rules so the rules serve humanity, not humanity the rules, who loves a good time, a good laugh, and who is determined to save not just the few and deserving, but the whole wide world, and who does so, not with some magical wave of a wand, but by loving every single human person to death, to his death, a death on the cross.

It's scandalous really, when you think about it; how the way to God isn't through prosperity or moral perfection or human effort, but solely by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus — solely by the grace of God.

And this scandal has consequences.

It means saying "yes" to this God who is even now hard at work, bringing creation to completion by mixing spit and mud, smearing it on our blind spots, on our hurts, on our fears.

It means changing how we imagine God to be, and trading in our fears of a fierce and grumpy old man so that we might come to see God more like a wildly pregnant woman in the midst of agonizing but hopeful labor, a labor that is preparing to give birth to you and I as new human beings, and in some baffling but magnificent way, entreating all of us to join in the labor, to join in the mud and the spit and to proclaim the gospel, sometimes with our words, but more so with our lives.

And if you think I'm committing heresy or just making this stuff up, listen to what the scholars have to say about it:

In the gospel of John, "sin is fundamentally about one's relationship with God, ..., and the decisive measure of one's relationship with God is one's faith in Jesus. This flies in the face of views that want to define sin as right action or right conduct and thus establish the norms for judgment. In John, these norms boil down to this: Have faith in Jesus. And so judgment isn't based on what people do, but on people's embrace of God in Jesus. The only way to be excluded from Jesus' offer of salvation is to turn your back on the offer. It's not up to Christians to judge anyone's sins, because that rests solely with God. By coming into the world, Jesus saves the whole world, not through our efforts or merit, but through the undeserved, indeed, sometimes even unwanted, grace of God." The New Interpreters Bible, V. 9, 664.(some paraphrase).

The mystery of Christ's presence therefore exists in all of history, and even more to the point, the presence of all sinful history exists in Christ — and it is Christ's presence in all of our history, most especially his presence in our sinful history — that saves the world. Capon, *The Fingerprints of God*, 48 (paraphrased).

"But wait!," you say, "what about the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Jews, the atheists and the animists?"

"What about these, our brothers and sisters?"

But if Jesus is the face of God sent to redeem the whole world, then perhaps no matter the name by which we call him, even if he is called by no name at all, the whole world is in fact caught up in his redemption.

Our special task is to witness to that reality with our lives.

Which means that the task of the church is not to be a delivery service hired to take Jesus to the heathen, but to witness to the Christ already among them.

We don't celebrate the Eucharist inside our church buildings in order to find a Jesus who isn't present elsewhere, we receive Jesus in the sacrament of his brokenness so that we can recognize his presence in the brokenness of the world outside.

When we take communion to the sick, we're not bringing Jesus to people from whom he was missing; we're celebrating with them the Incarnate Word they never lost.

And above all, we don't try to live holy and blameless lives in order to keep God from being mad at us; we choose that way of life because his holiness and blamelessness have been ours all along, and we've come to trust God's plans for us more than we trust our own plans. Id. at 62, paraphrased.

Faith in Jesus: it is the gateway to God; for it is his voice who calls to you and you and me; his is the pasture we are invited to enter, because he is the gateway to life, to life in all its fullness, to life that is abundant!

+amen