

# A New Kind of Gate

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: Who is “in” and who is “out”?

When our family moved into our current house about 15 years ago, my son, Henry, was 10 and my daughter, Ellie, was 3. The house was built in 1941. It has an upstairs bonus room and there are two doors off of that room that lead to short storage spaces under the roof where it gets low. Henry immediately claimed one of these spaces as a “secret” hideout for his new club. He took a piece of paper (hold up paper) and divided it into two columns: what to buy for the club and how to get into the club. It hung in the attic area for many years until I finally placed it in a ziplock bag about two years ago, so the list of entrance criteria into the club is mostly worn away. But it’s clear that this club was intended to be exclusive. Some were allowed in and others not.

Lines of division are all around us. Lines divide traffic on roads (thank goodness!). We wait in lines all the time. Woe to the one who cuts IN line! As you walk into the office area here at church, you’ll see a certain kind of line - signs on doors that say “Private”, indicating that some are welcome and some are not. Those signs are important, but they’re not intended to keep you out. They’re intended to keep out Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers if they show up at Southminster. People who feel threatened by them can go to rooms labeled “private” where they’ll be less likely to be abducted. These lines are very visible, but many lines are invisible ... to the eye, but very visible in practicality. The line between rich and poor is obvious, though you can’t actually see it. Lines of privilege based on social status, skin color, language, education, religion, physical ability, age, gender, sexual identity and so much more are ever-present in our culture.

We’re very familiar with lines. I suspect everyone in this room and online has some story to tell about being on the undesirable side of a line. Even if we don’t like the world of lines, whether we’re the ones being excluded or the ones included by no merit of our own, we’ve come to expect hierarchy and division in daily life. Even if we work toward erasing lines, as people who have worked for social justice for thousands and thousands of years have been doing, lines seem to be incredibly difficult to eradicate. So, we’ve come to expect lines of division and separation, even if we don’t accept them, even as we work to obliterate them.

Oh that God’s kin-dom would come and God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven. We proclaim that lines will no longer exist when God is fully in charge, but we can’t

seem to muster the courage to be so radically inclusive while we're (partly) in charge of things. But the kin-dom of heaven, we believe, will be different. And so, when Jesus describes himself as the gate, I find it troubling. Jesus is a gate? Does that mean that he's ultimately in charge of letting some in and keeping others out, even when God's in charge? What else could be the purpose of a gate? People put gates in places where they want some to walk through and others to stay out. What's up with Jesus calling himself a gate?

When we're just getting to know someone, the topic of what we do for a living can come up and it can change the way people view us. When people see me as just a person, people talk to me about all kinds of things. But when they find out I'm a pastor, that seems to narrow the conversation a bit. (And shorten it!) Suddenly, language and even posture change. I might say that I'm a Presbyterian pastor, and if the other person has any working knowledge of matters theological, they might say, "Oh, you believe in predestination!" If that concept is acknowledged, it's typically understood as the belief that some are "predestined" to go to heaven, that God has already chosen "the elect" for salvation from before time began. Then there's double predestination which offers an addendum: others are "predestined" to go to anti-heaven. Now we're back to "gate" thinking. Interestingly, Presbyterians also talk a lot about free will and these two ideas - free will and predestination - would seem to be at odds. How baffling and contradictory!

But Karl Barth helped me re-think this whole idea of predestination - of thinking that some are in and some are out. He said that predestination isn't a theology directed at any of us. It's directed at Jesus Christ who is both the God who elects and the human who is elected (predestination) ... and rejected (double predestination). If you've grown up in the U.S., you've grown up in a culture that focuses on the individual and on individual salvation. But Barth shows us that individualistic "some are 'in' and some are 'out'" thinking isn't what predestination is about. It's about Jesus Christ who was predestined before time began for election. Through him, God has chosen to erase lines of division and to save all of humanity through Christ.

But then again, Jesus says, "I am the gate." In verse 7, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep," and in verse 9, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved." Gates are about keeping some "in" and others "out". Well, here's the thing about gates: they're based on belief and behavior.

Let's look at gates in relation to behavior first. Fences can be built around sheep or cows to keep them within a controlled area. Without a fence, they may wander off. But we're not trying to communicate to sheep that they need to behave differently. The fence is simply a barrier for them. When one builds a fence around their house, they're not trying to keep the people inside from escaping; the fence serves to communicate a message to those

OUTside the fence: either that 1) the people in the house want privacy or 2) for possible bad actors, their behavior is not accepted within the area of the fence. Gates, of course, communicate something even further: the owner has control over who is allowed to come in and who isn't. So when we hear about Jesus as the gate, we think: "He's the owner, and he'll decide who gets in. Those who behave badly won't get in, while those who behave properly will be allowed to enter." But here's the rub: I've got all kinds of ideas about what "bad behavior" is and who should be allowed "in". If I'm honest, I think God thinks the same as I do, and so I've now constructed a framework about heaven (salvation) based on my understanding of fences and gates: God is the owner and God keeps people out who behave in certain ways (which happen to align with ways that I think are bad).

What about gates in relation to beliefs? The concept of "doctrine" has taken quite a beating in the last 100 years as people have been questioning the idea of "right" belief. What is "doctrine"? It's a written down set of beliefs or principles held by a group. In the early 20th century, conservative American Protestants came up with a core set of doctrines (The Five Fundamentals). They are: Scripture is the inerrant word of God. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus is God incarnate. Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for human sin. Jesus was physically resurrected from the dead. There are many other doctrines in many other traditions and, like the Five Fundamentals, they serve the purpose of deciding who gets in and who stays out of the groups who hold those beliefs. As people have been questioning the whole concept of doctrine, of right belief, some have left the groups that use doctrine as a gate, saying that they don't want to be part of an organization that requires its members to hold certain beliefs. And so lots of people have left the Church entirely. Still others have doubled-down on doctrine, and so we have fundamentalists who continue to stand by the gate like bouncers at the door of a night club. Fundamentalists fundamentally believe in gates.

But what if Jesus wants us to think altogether differently about gates? Rather than thinking about gates as entrances through which some people pass and others don't, based on their behavior or their beliefs, what if Jesus IS the gate. He said as much: "I am the gate." What if the gate IS Jesus and belief and behavior are completely irrelevant, so that there is no way to get in or out because there's no "out". Scandalous! (I can see the tabloid headlines now: "Founder of new tradition caught in heaven-gate scandal.) Jesus was all about reinterpretation of old ideas. When he sat down at Table with his disciples before he was arrested, he shared a meal with them. It had been Jewish tradition for centuries to gather around a table to commemorate the exodus - the way out - from Egypt and from slavery. This is what Jesus was doing, but he also reinterpreted the symbols of bread and cup. He said, this unleavened bread (Matzah) which you're eating, this bread of affliction, this is my body which is given for you. He did the same with one of the four traditional

cups. He took the “cup of blessing” and said, this is my blood which represents the establishment of a “new covenant” between you and God. Back to gates, he didn’t say “I am the gate” to mean that he was the new gatekeeper with the charge of keeping some out and letting others in. I think he reinterpreted the whole concept of “gates” to mean that he had come to replace gate thinking altogether, to replace the idea that we need to focus on gates that keep out wrong belief and behavior. Our focus is now on Jesus who is all about belonging.

Now this sounds great, until we start reading the Material Safety Data Sheet on this new gate:

This new gate is to be permanently installed and shall not be used to keep anyone out. “Anyone” includes: fundamentalists, anti-fundamentalists, people of any political party, current or past presidents, people we like or people we don’t like, those who look suspicious, people who disagree with us even about our most dearly held beliefs, etc. etc.

And remember the “Private” signs I mentioned earlier, the ones intended to keep out Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers? In God’s kin-dom, they’re “in” too. Now, that’s not to say that I approve of what they’re doing. I oppose the fact that they target certain people and I oppose their sometimes lawless tactics, but I believe that God says everyone is included in the Beloved Community. “Anyone” means everyone.

Let’s pray: God, you said to Peter in a dream: “Do not call anything impure that I have made clean.” As Jesus healed lepers and blind people and then told them to go to the priests to make an offering as a testimony against the line-drawers at the temple, may we also be healers and reconcilers in a world torn by division, knowing that you call all people Beloved even when we do things that are wrong or hurtful. Give us courage to extend your love into the world so that your will for all here and now may look more and more like it is in heaven. Amen.