

4th Sunday of Easter

May 15, 2011

4 PM and 10 AM

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Whenever I hear stories about Jesus talking with the Pharisees in the gospels, I expect that very shortly the Pharisees will be revealed to be dense, uncomprehending, slow of heart and mind, or worse. This is particularly true for John's gospel. But I must confess that today, I'm with the Pharisees on this one. If I had been in the original audience when Jesus called himself "the sheep gate," I don't think I would have had a clue as to what he was talking about. I am the sheep gate?

I suspect the story might be perfectly clear to the shepherds among us. And there were, apparently, a good number of shepherds working in Jesus' time and place. But the immediate urgency of the image is lost on folks like me. I know it's only a metaphor, but it's still hard to relate!

I did have a dog growing up, and Cubby certainly knew my voice (and my mother's and other family members). He could tell the difference between thieves and family. And he knew with whom to snuggle for affection and/or food. But we didn't have a "dog gate." And if we had, it would still seem like a fairly derogatory image to use to name someone. "There goes good old dog-gate!"

John's gospel is filled with many other beautiful metaphors and names for Jesus. He is

called “the bread that comes down from heaven” (John 6: 50), “the living water” (John 4: 10-11), “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25), and “the true vine” (John 15: 1). He is even called the shepherd himself in many gospel passages, including today’s, and in our beautiful and familiar Psalm response today. “The Lord is my Shepherd, there is nothing I shall want....” But why the sheep gate?

The more I pondered this image, the more I realized that I was missing a dimension that really was telling and beautiful. Think of the gate as a door if that helps. Jesus is saying to us: I am the door, the only door, through which life will make sense for you. You can keep banging on the walls if you wish; you can shatter the windows and break down the walls (to remember an old Bob Dylan favorite), but ‘the times, they are a changin.’ The times have indeed already changed. Easter does that! Resurrection does that!

The times have changed in Christ Jesus. That’s what the Easter season is all about. There is something different and new happening. God is still Eastering! That’s why it takes so long to celebrate and to try to grasp. And Jesus says again today: Stop banging the walls; stop breaking the windows, stop trying to jump over the fence. Stop searching so desperately for more meaning,

more fulfillment, more happiness in your life. I am the gate. I am the gate to all that, and more.

I am the door, beautifully hinged and invitingly trimmed. For God's sake, literally, enter through me.

Remember the old "Let's Make A Deal" TV show? Think of today's gospel as Jesus asking:

Don't you want to see what's behind Door Number One? You sure you don't want to know? I do.

Now all we have to figure out is what it means to enter through that door, through that gate?

And today's story answers that question too. Jesus sums up his whole vocation in life at the end of

today's passage. "I came so that they might have life, and have it more abundantly." That's all

God wants for us!

My brothers and sisters, there is no clearer statement of what Jesus' whole life is about in all

the scriptures. The door leads to life. The gate leads to life. Life that is not just survival, not

just endurance, not even just sequential. But life that is abundant, full, rich beyond our wildest

dreams. That's what he came to offer. And he is the only gate. Is this only for Pollyanna?

You'll have to try the gate to know. Trusting is never easy. Trusting is always a repeated risk.

But...is there an alternative? Not according to Jesus in today's gospel.

All you and I have to do now is take the chance again, walk through, and see what happens

this time. Maybe being called a sheep-gate isn't so bad after all. Pick a door. Choose life in abundance. And good luck.