

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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**“Walls, Gates, and Doors”  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter (Year A)  
May 7, 2017  
John 10:1-10**

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In a Lenten meditation for Holy Week, Walter Brueggemann reminded me  
that in contrast to God’s kingdom call to welcome one another in love,  
our world of exclusion is grounded in fear and anxiety.

“All around now are barriers and gates and fences that draw lines  
around gifts and possibilities and resources and accesses,” Brueggemann notes.

“The lines are drawn closer and closer until all are excluded  
except the blessed cunning ones, and even they are left nervous  
about when the next wall will be built and who will then be excluded,” he says.  
(Brueggemann, Walter. *A Way Other Than Our Own.*, p. 85)

Some walls are literal and visible: higher fences, gates around communities,  
walls at the border, barriers at the airports.

And other walls are figurative and invisible:

barriers to health care or bathroom accessibility,  
meters that prevent the poor from parking on the street,  
language barriers, zoning laws that restrict affordable housing,

even barriers of intimidation that create refugee anxiety,  
or make people of different religious practices feel threatened.

This is nothing new, actually. It was happening under the umbrella  
of Pax Romana, too, when the Roman Empire managed  
a period of relative tranquility and stability,  
beginning with the reign of Emperor Caesar Augustus.

You will recall this was the same emperor who called for the census  
that sent Mary and Joseph slouching towards Bethlehem,  
where they were confronted by a closed door at the inn,  
and later forced to seek refuge as a family in exile in Egypt.

This period of relative Roman stability lasted for some 200 years; peaceful,  
but largely sustained by walls, fences, barriers, and boundaries that separated  
neighbor from neighbor,  
and created an atmosphere of exclusivity and exceptionalism.

Into this world, Jesus comes as the Word made flesh  
to proclaim an alternative way of being in this world of exclusion.

"I am" he says seven perfect times in John's Gospel. *I am* the Bread of Life;

*I am* the Light of the World; *I am* the Good Shepherd;

*I am* the Resurrection and the Life; *I am* the Way, the Truth and the Life;

*I am* the True Vine. And in today's passage, *I am* the Gate.

"I am" is code for "God", of course, relying on the Jewish theological tradition,  
where God self-identifies to Moses in Exodus as YHWH: "I AM, WHO I AM".

I think *Gate* is the least understood of all these metaphors which Jesus uses to identify himself as God, because a gate is inanimate, AND because a gate seems to be understood primarily as a barrier, which is how even the Church has used it at times to fence the communion table, or to exclude people from participation or membership in the church.

Confirmands, I think I told you that when I was your age, I was not allowed to participate in Holy Communion until I made a public profession of faith and was confirmed as an eighth grader.

At that time, all children were barred from taking Holy Communion until we understood the sacraments as well as adults do. Ha!

But when Jesus uses the metaphor *I am the Gate* in John's Gospel, he doesn't use it to infer separateness, or apartness, or even holiness; he uses it to infer "access" - that he is the unique way in and out; the egress to salvation, to green pastures and to life abundant.

I am reminded of Theologian Rebecca Chopp, who calls Jesus in John's Gospel "the perfectly open sign", in that Jesus is perfectly open to God, and at the same time, perfectly open to other people.

And as such, Jesus is that porous portal, that slapping screen door, that loosely-latching gate, that graciously-open entryway calling and inviting us into a different kind of community.

His is a poorly-gated community that swings wide to welcome, to include, to bless, to transform, to heal and to liberate through life-giving relationships,

that foster truth, hope, and harmony.

(I feel like I'm starting to sound like a Coke commercial!)

His is a relational gateway to community, providing health-giving connections that promote the worth, dignity and care of each individual, and that promise life in all its abundance.

Listen, let me tell you a story that I have been wanting to share with you for a long time.

Horst Meyer, one of our most ebullient members who died last September, knew how to live life abundantly.

Horst was one of my early morning Farmers' Market friends.

I normally would see him first thing each Saturday morning at 8 a.m. at Durham Central Park when the bell would ring and the Farmers' Market would open to buyers.

Upon which, it was not beyond Horst to greet me effervescently by shoving a strawberry in my mouth saying,

"They're beautiful, Marilyn. You need to buy some strawberries today."

That was his style! Horst moved fast, talked fast, and enjoyed life to its fullest.

When I heard that Horst had become bed-ridden last July, I visited, and said to him, "Listen, Horst, if there is anything at the Farmers' Market that would taste especially good to you, I'm glad to go and pick it up for you."

To which he replied, "Yes... I want you to visit my favorite vendors there, thank them for their years of wonderful food and friendship,

and tell them good-bye for me.”

And he cited a list of merchants, called them by name whom I was to find:  
the people at the Flat River Farm booth, to thank them for their beautiful tomatoes;  
the two sweet girls at Loaf Bakery, to thank them for the wonderful fruit bread;  
the “corpulent violinist” who plays on the lawn, Mr. David McKnight;  
and the bakery lady with the cowboy hat across from the Flat River Farm booth.  
And with that brief instruction, I had my assignment,  
which was kind of like a scavenger hunt.

So the next Saturday, I put on my Presbyterian t-shirt so I could self-identify,  
and headed down to the market early in the cool of the morning.

I found the people at the Flat River Farm booth, delivered Horst’s message,  
took their picture as they were holding hands full of tomatoes,  
and them received a bag of them, for free, to deliver to Horst.

I stood in line a long time to greet the two sweet girls from Loaf Bakery,  
delivered their message, took their picture, and they gave me Horst’s  
favorite fruit bread as a parting gift for him.

I found the violinist, David McKnight, who happened to be playing the guitar  
that day, and learned that we both were native Charlotteans,  
and good old Presbyterians.

He said he always played his first song of the day for Horst.

So, as I took his picture, he serenaded me on my way with a song.

And lastly, I found the bakery lady with the cowboy hat, and she said  
to tell Horst that she sends her love, and that she would see him again

on the other side, at that Great Farmers' Market in the sky,  
where things would be vastly improved from life here.  
I have to tell you, that by the time I finished my assignment, my scavenger hunt,  
tears were welling up, and I felt that a thin place had opened up,  
and that I had passed through the *I AM Gate*  
into that alternative reality that Jesus calls The Kingdom,  
where a world of welcome exists that calls us by name and invites us,  
to green pastures and life abundant, without barriers, walls or fences,  
without differentiation between merchant and buyer,  
between Presbyterian and pedestrian,  
between moneyed and unmoneyed, between well and sick,  
even between fully-alive and barely-alive;  
but where each of us is known by name, and called into relationships  
of mutual respect, dignity, encouragement, harmony and hope.  
I am thankful that Horst invited me to glimpse that alternative reality of abundant life,  
and I am thankful to Jesus, *the Gate*, who opened up that world for me to see,  
and then invited me to live into it, beyond the afterglow of that experience.

The Poet Joyce Kilmer, the same poet who sounds like a woman, but really is a man,  
and who wrote *Trees*, that we all had to memorize in elementary school,  
wrote a *Ballad of Christmas Eve* back in 1912, called *Gates and Doors*.  
He captures well, I think, the *I Am* metaphor of Jesus as *The Perfectly Open Gate*,  
in the refrains within his ballad:

## **Refrain #1**

*So let the gate swing open  
However poor the yard,  
Lest weary People visit you  
and find their Passage barred.  
Unlatch the door at midnight  
and let your lantern glow  
shine out to guide the traveler's feet  
to you across the snow.*

## **Refrain #2**

Unlock the door this evening  
And let your gate swing wide,  
Let all who ask for shelter  
Come speedily inside.  
What if your yard be narrow?  
What if your house be small?  
There is a Guest is coming  
Will glorify it all.

(Stevenson, Burton Egbert, ed., *The Home Book of Verse*, Volume 1, New York: Henry Holt and company, 1912)

Friends, here is the good news. Out beyond the world of walls, fences, and barriers,  
there is on offer a world of welcome,  
that sees *the other* not as unwanted or threat or competitor

but rather as fellow pilgrim on the difficult road of humanity.

That alternative world of welcome is offered by Jesus, the Gate;

but it is made manifest in lives like ours that reach out and form relationships

in order to heal and transform. **Amen.**

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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