

Gate Issues
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, May 3, 2020

John 10

“Very truly,” Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.”

I can remember as a little girl, reaching up to pull the latch on my grandmother’s white wooden picket gate, which would then swing open, and let me run into her back yard, bare foot in grass, to the rhubarb patch at the back of her property.

Another gate I used thousands of times was the gate in the side fence where I grew up. There was a pool in the back yard and so when my friends came over to swim, I’d let them in by the side gate, always remembering to listen for the bang of the gate as I pushed it shut behind me, and then run barefoot along the patio stones to jump into the pool with my friends.

I often drive along Bethesda Road, between the 9th and the 10th. There are pedestrian gates on the south side that only allow people, not cars, to go into the grassed areas near the town baseball and soccer fields. Across from the Ball park, tradespeople have worked months on an enormous stone and wrought iron gate that protects the extremely large custom home that towers behind it.

There are chain link gates – I think of the very annoying one at the Park ‘N Fly at Pearson Airport, that takes about five minutes to rattle open to let me into the parking lot, and then another 5 minutes to rattle shut behind me.

I live in a culture too that celebrates famous civic gates – in Toronto we have the Princess Gates at the Exhibition Grounds. England has the Buckingham Palace Gates. There is the famous Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.

I am becoming aware though that the gates I think about are gates that are part of my culture, my world. These are gates that I see, that are a part of my life. Are there some gates out there that I just don’t see?

Jesus walked through many gates during his travel with the disciples. He would often heal someone who was sitting near one of those gates, for the gates were where the poor gathered, the blind, and the abandoned. In Luke 16:19, we read about the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores.” In Luke 7:12, Jesus is walking into the town called Nain. “As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out ... He came forward and touched the bier and he said, ‘Young man, I say to you, rise!’ The dead man sat up and began to speak.” In John 5:2, “In Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids – blind, lame, and paralyzed.” Jesus will heal the man who was paralyzed, telling him to ‘Stand up, take your mat and walk.’”

Jesus healed the people who congregated at the gates of the town, in public places. Do we have such gates here? We do, except they're invisible to our eyes. But *very* visible to the people who experience isolation and judgement and abandonment in our society. Wherever the homeless gather, where the homeless create community, there is always a gate of judgement near by. Sometimes the homeless build their own cities – we call them tent cities, or cardboard box cities. And the gate that surrounds them is a forest, or maybe its the concrete ramp of the Gardiner Expressway. As a society, our municipalities tear down those cities; they are an eyesore, they are unsafe. And where do we expect them to go once the place they called 'home' is destroyed? Sometimes we don't even have to demolish the tents – this past winter the tent city under the Gardiner Expressway caught on fire and eradicated the camp for us.

A subway grate is a gate in a way. It stands between the homeless person and the public space. It guarantees that people will leave them alone, walking around them rather than near them.

Cathy Crowe is a Toronto Street Nurse. She's been doing it for over 30 years. She is a quiet saint who continues to be a valued presence within the homeless community, who fights political battles for the homeless. You know how you will see a homeless person curled up in a sleeping bag on a sidewalk? She writes that "the average street life of a [sleeping] bag is about three days: they get wet, soiled, or thrown into the garbage by city clean-up crews."¹ I thought they used the same one all year.

Cathy Crowe was on Steve Paikin's TVO program a week or two ago, quietly asserting the need to house the homeless and give them space to isolate in during the Covid-19 pandemic. The homeless population is communal. They gather in shelters and facilities where they are in close quarters, sleeping in cots, eating at tables, where the six-foot distancing rule of the pandemic is hard to practice. She, and others, are pushing for the municipal governments to move faster on the opening of booked hotel rooms to move these people into safety, to a place where our most vulnerable will have shelter, running water, and safety.

Jesus is the gate, whether it's a gate we recognize from *our* world, or it's the gate that the homeless population see in their world. Jesus is the gate, regardless of the context. If we think of the gate and the shepherd and the sheep, we begin to realize that there are all kinds of sheep under Jesus' care; sheep we've never heard of, sheep we've never imagined. And yet, they're sheep. And we're *all* in the fold because Jesus is the shepherd regardless of what gate you're looking at.

The church is called to follow the voice of the shepherd, and meet the people at the gates, wherever those gates may be, tending to the sick and the homeless who gather at the public gates. Wherever that gate stands, whether in a backyard garden fence or over a subway grate, Jesus is the shepherd to all the sheep, whether lost and homeless, or comfortable and well-fed.

Jesus stands at the gate. Do you see him there?

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Cathy Crowe, *Dying for a Home: Homeless Activists Speak Out* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2007), 15.