

John 10:1-18 "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. ² The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³ The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵ They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." ⁶ Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. ⁷ So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸ All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹ I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. ¹¹ "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away -- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. ¹³ The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ¹⁶ I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. ¹⁷ For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes¹ it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

“The Gate to What?”

I am of the opinion that we are more accustomed to hear this passage from John used in more evangelistic reasons and that creates a problem for us really hearing what the passage is about. Jesus says, “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” and later he also says in vv. 27-28, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” When we of the well-churched variety hear those words we are conditioned like Pavlov's dog to think it's about that pop-Christian gospel which says if you make the self-saving decision to believe the right things about Jesus your immortal soul will go to spend eternity in Heaven when you die. Another and similar way this passage is frequently used is to say that there is no salvation apart from Jesus Christ. He is the only way that anyone can be saved.

Well, I have a qualm with the way this passage is typically used. The qualm is not our saying that there is no salvation except in Jesus Christ. By virtue of his being God the Son become human and his resurrection from the dead, he is Lord and only in union with him in the Holy Spirit is there abundant and eternal life as the result of the Father's love. Indeed and emphatically, salvation is only in and through Jesus Christ. There is no other way to know God and be saved. My qualm rather is that we of the churched variety have been so well schooled in this being a text about what happens after we die that we miss the point that it is

about life in Christ right now, a kind of life that will carry on forever. We must step back and ask anew what does Jesus mean when he says, “I am the gate.” That question begs another question; the gate to what? Let's take the round about way of answering that question.

Jesus says that whoever enters through, with, and by means of him will be saved. A better way to say this that fits more with the context of this whole passage is that whoever enters through, with, and by means of Jesus will be kept safe; kept safe from the thieves and wolves who would destroy them. The thieves jump the fence to steal the sheep, but the sheep don't recognize their voices so they don't follow them out. Jesus is also the good shepherd who protects the sheep from the wolves. Thus, Jesus is both the gate by which the sheep come safely into the fold and safely go out to find pasture and he is also the shepherd who keeps them safe, safe from thieves while they are in the fold and from the wolves while they are at pasture. So for the sake of the big picture, this idea of coming in and out in safety accompanied by the good shepherd is part of the image that we need to hold to here.

Two other things we need to note. First, Jesus is comparing himself to the the Scribes, Pharisees, and temple authorities. They are the thieves who try to enter the sheepfold by means other than the gate they are also the hired hands who flee as soon as the wolf appears. Second, the passage is a continuation of a dispute that Jesus was having with the Scribes, Pharisees, and temple authorities because he had healed a man born blind, someone they would have said was utterly cursed by God and deserving of being cutoff from the human community and thus he begged. Jesus' healing the man restored him to full human dignity and community. The Scribes, Pharisees, and temple authorities said that Jesus did this by the power of demons because he did the healing on a Sabbath.

Having said all that by way of placing this text within its context, we can start to answer the question of what Jesus is the gate to. The obvious answer in the text is that Jesus is the gate to abundant or eternal life. As I said earlier Jesus is not talking about dying and going to Heaven here. He is talking about having life to its fullest, life that is characterized by life that is eternal in nature. This life has something to do with God's own rest, Sabbath rest. It has something to do with restoration to full human dignity and community. It has something to do with being kept safe from those who would destroy our faith and relationship with God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Finally, this abundant and eternal life is only available in, through, and as Jesus Christ.

If I were to offer a preliminary description of what this abundant and eternal life looks like I would put out to you the passage we read from Acts 2: They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

The abundant life, life abundantly as John calls it, is the common life of Christian community. It is filled with worship, sharing meals, sharing our possessions so that no one of us has need. It's life gathered around the table to learn, eat, pray and to share in the Lord's supper. It is an awe-filled life where God frequently does signs and wonders which point us towards the day we he puts all things to rights. It is life filled with hospitality as the Lord brings more and more people to himself through the community of faith and we welcome them in his

name.

This abundant life is also eternal life which is God's own life. When we talk about eternal life we seem to only conceptualize it as living forever where life goes on and on and on like the EverReady Bunny. Yet, when John speaks of eternal life he comes at it from the angle that only God is eternal and therefore to speak of eternal life is to speak of God's own life and our participation in it. In 2nd Peter chapter 2 Peter augments this very well saying: “May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowing of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowing of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowing of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Knowing Jesus Christ is participation in the divine nature, participation in God's very self. I haven't mentioned the Trinity for awhile, so brace yourselves. We know God as Trinity, as the loving communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; three in one, one in three. God is a communion of persons who give themselves so completely to one another in unconditional love that they each cannot be without the others. The Father loves the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Son loves the Father in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the loving of the Father and Son which we know. To know Jesus Christ is to know the steadfast love and faithfulness that the Father has for him and the only way to know this is in union with Christ in the Holy Spirit. To know the Father is to know the Son's love and desire to do his will and the only way to know this is in union with Christ in the Holy Spirit. So, to participate in the divine nature which is what it is to have eternal life is to participate in the loving communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by being united with Christ Jesus in the Holy Spirit sharing in his relationship with the Father and doing it in the context of Christian community.

Abundant and eternal life is the fellowship that grows when Christians get together and God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is in our midst. Human community that is filled with the communion of God the Trinity is what Jesus is the gate to. Community filled with God's own fellowship is what he creates and safeguards in our lives forever. This is what Christianity is all about. What does it look like? Well, a few weeks ago Dana and I had the elders and their spouses over for dinner. It was a great evening filled with people sharing a meal and getting to know each other better that came to an end with a short prayer. Abundant and eternal life is as simple as that; true friendship that we know is indwelt by God's very self.

So to wrap it up, this passage isn't about dying and going to heaven. It is about the fellowship that God has placed here in our midst. The challenge to us is that if we truly do want to have abundant and eternal life, then we have to set our individualistic bent aside and come and love one another as we each have been loved. Indeed, Jesus is the gate, but are we willing to take the risk of walking through it by truly covenanting with one another to share our lives, to accountability to one another under the confines of the Scripture? Are we willing to put this Christian fellowship before all the other fellowships that are in our lives? Those are the difficult questions that face the disciples of Jesus Christ. Really, how far are we willing to go through that gate? Amen.

