

1 When you meet someone new, what's the first thing you learn about that person after their name and where they live? Usually what they do, right? People have always associated who they are with what they do, so much so that our names used to identify our jobs (think Miller or Barber, for example). With so many more people in this world, and so many more jobs, we've gotten away from that kind of naming convention, but we still find a great deal of our identities in the roles we play in life. If you were to introduce yourself with a simple statement, "I am a _____," what would you say? "I am a mother?" "I am a retiree?" How many "I am" statements would it take before the person meeting you might begin to get a sense of who you are? Let's give that a try. Take a minute and simply introduce yourself to someone else using some "I am" statements. It doesn't matter if it's someone you already know, the action here is in discovering which words you use to describe yourselves. Go ahead and give it a try now. {Pause for a minute to allow for the exercise}

I'm guessing that some of you said, "I am a father," "I am a student," "I am a wife," "I am a dairy farmer," or "I am a veteran." There are so many different ways for us to describe who we are. What are some of the other ways you described yourselves? {Field some comments from the floor}. I'm guessing that for any one person sitting here in the sanctuary, we could easily come up with 50 to 100 or more descriptions of who you are, and still we'd be falling short of a perfect description, because listening to "I am" statements is no substitute for being in a relationship over time, and healthy relationships are always growing in knowledge and love of one another.

The same thing can be said of Jesus, and then some. There are so many names that have been given to Jesus over the years- Rock, Savior, Messiah, Emmanuel. Today we begin a worship series focused on seven special names that Jesus gave to himself in the Gospel of John. Hearing these names isn't sufficient for us to completely know Jesus, but each of these names is an invitation for us to grow more in love with the one we call our Lord. Every one of the names is introduced in that "I am" format you just tried out, but in the case of Jesus, that little saying takes on some extra meaning that's pivotal for the understanding of every name of Jesus. To understand that meaning, we have to look earlier in the Gospel of John,

where Jesus was nearly stoned for saying, “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”¹ While that sounds confusing to us today, it would have been unmistakably clear to the Jewish crowd- Jesus was claiming to be God by implying a reference to the encounter Moses had with God in the burning bush. Do you remember what God said to Moses back in Exodus 3:14? “ I AM WHO I AM... Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”² Whenever we call Jesus by name, we remember that Jesus is first, simply “I am.” Each name beyond that is just a facet of human understanding applied to an infinite and awesome God. Like any love relationship, the journey of joy is found in discovering more and more of Jesus as we walk with him each day.

2 We’re starting with one of the most often neglected names for Jesus: The Gate. Before today, did you even know that Jesus said, “I am the gate”? I Googled “Jesus I am the gate t shirt.” Guess how many results were returned? Zero! “I am the light?” No problem. “I am the Good Shepherd?” Plenty of people selling those. “I am the gate” Nada. But don’t take my word for it. Let’s hear it from the source. I’m reading from John, chapter 10, in the New Living Translation.

{Read John 10:1-10 (NLT)}.

3 What could Jesus possibly have been thinking by calling himself the gate? Plenty, and quite possibly more than you think. But let’s start with the most plain meaning of his metaphor by remembering that sheep are prey animal, not predators. That means that other animals eat sheep, and not the other way around. And even though God blessed sheep with a really wide visual field of view to detect predators, they’re not very smart animals and they simply can’t defend themselves. Shepherds in the time of Jesus relied on a couple of different strategies to keep sheep safe while the shepherds slept. One thing they could do if they were near a town was to share a large communal sheep pen with a paid gate guard. Sheep learned the voice of their shepherds, so when morning came, each shepherd could simply call out to their sheep and the flocks would sort themselves out, each flock following the voice of the shepherd they knew. If they were out in their fields, they used simple rock rings to coral the sheep together, with the shepherd actually sleeping in the gap between the

¹ John 8:58 (NRSV)

² Exodus 3:14 (NRSV)

rocks, the shepherd in effect becoming the living gate. So when Jesus said, “I am the gate,” he meant at least two things: Going “in” through the gate of Jesus is the way to be in a place of safety, both eternally and in the here and now- a place of a “rich and satisfying life”; and only Jesus determines who can come in.

What’s really interesting about all this is that Jesus was apparently giving this teaching while standing amongst the crowds at the Temple in Jerusalem, a place where sheep routinely came in but never came out. Why? Because they were slaughtered there before the altar of God, sacrificed to atone for sins committed by God’s people. Jesus, on the other hand, turns this reality on its head by calling us his sheep and then describing a sheepfold where we can not only come into but, unlike the sheep sacrificed at the Temple, also come out again. It was the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, that atoned for our sins, once for all, allowing us to come into God’s presence and not die, but live.

4 Jesus also had something else on his mind when he called himself the gate: “thieves and robbers,” who he defines as “anyone who tries to sneak over the wall of a sheepfold.”³ The old roadrunner cartoons came to mind for me as I thought about this. Wile E Coyote tries all manner of deception to catch and eat the roadrunner, including painting a fake tunnel on the side of a cliff, a kind of gate that the roadrunner is able to zip through without any trouble, while poor Wile E Coyote just slams into the side of the cliff. Who are these thieves and robbers, these Wile E Coyotes of the sheepfold to which Jesus is the gate? In one sense, they’re anyone who’s trying to convince us that we can get into the sheepfold any other way than through the gate; those who say we can find fullness of life and eternal security through anything other than a living relationship with Jesus. At the time Jesus was teaching, he was especially talking about the Jewish religious leaders who insisted that the way into the sheepfold was through a strict keeping of the rules. Today it might be anyone with something to sell, whether it’s a self-help program, a diet fad, or the home remodeling obsessions of HGTV.

5 In other ways, the thieves and robbers can be us, anytime we try to jump the fence and find a shortcut to fulfillment. Jumping the fence reminds me of the old teenage tradition

³ John 10:1, NLT (2nd Ed.)

of sneaking your friends into a drive-in theater in the trunk of your car. (By the way, can anyone identify the movie on the screen?) Or maybe you grew up in rural America and you jumped a fence to do some cow tipping? I remember taking an occasional shortcut through a neighbor's fenced-in yard to avoid walking around the block. We've all jumped some fences in our lives, but what sometimes works with human fences never works with God's fences. Jesus isn't "a" gate, Jesus is "the" gate, and there's no jumping the wall while Jesus isn't looking or sneaking into the peaceful presence of God in the trunk of a friend's car.

6 We are Easter people, living in the light of the resurrection. That's good news, because we know that to enter into the gate of Jesus doesn't mean we'll be sacrificed for our sins. Because Jesus lives, we can live also. But there's always a catch, isn't there? And here it is- If Jesus is the gate, that means it's up to us to walk thru. I was trying to imagine a door that went through a person instead of a person through a door, and I couldn't think of one. We have to walk through, and we know it'll be no cake walk. Jesus warns us that "small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."⁴

Each day after Easter Sunday is a chance for us to decide what we'll do. We can wander through the wilderness of life, hoping to avoid the hungry wolves and make it to the next day. We can try to jump the fence, futilely seeking fulfillment in the riches of this world. Or we can turn our eyes and incline our hearts to Jesus, the true and only gate through whom we can enter into God's presence and find a rich and satisfying life. The door is open, if only we'll knock and enter through.



Buffalo United Methodist Church

...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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⁴ Matthew 7:14, NIV (2001)