

Yellow is one of my two favorite colors. I need sunlight. I'm sitting in the soft yellow rays of today's sunlight in my living room. Dog poop! The voice of my toddler disrupts my sunlit serenity. The serenity I pray for every day. She's outside the front door and has either stepped in it or I hope not!—scooped it up. I told my wife I'm trying to write and record a podcast. But shift happens. I did say shift... I'm interrupted and less focused. But honestly, in the pastures of Jesus' time, as the shepherd led and the sheep wandered, I'm sure there were piles of — well, let's shift and focus:

My name is Melissa Guthrie Loy. My pronouns are she and her. I'm a pastor and nonprofit leader, the ED + Minister of Disciples AllianceQ. I'm a wife and parent. Like many of you, I've been in the same spot, real close to my flock for what feels like a really long time during this pandemic. I'm hoping in color and this week's color is yellow. Gilbert Baker assigned sunlight to this color. Our scripture is John 10:1-10. The NRSV reads...

“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. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

People focus on the sheep and the shepherd. The passage is titled The Good Shepherd. What if we shift our focus to the gate? John 10: The Good Gate.

Too many of us are too familiar with gates. Closets, closed doors and closed closet doors with signs that say “closed!” As if the locked gate didn't say enough. Some of the signs say “all are welcome.” But in unspoken words and loud practice those signs actually communicate “all are welcome who... look like us, worship like us...” live in a heteronormative, nuclear family with a dog and two children. One of the kids plays an instrument, the other: sports. A minivan is parked in the driveway. That's a little judgy. I had two kids and a minivan. I'm up to three kids and my wife does want a minivan. I had one when I was young. I'm too old for a minivan... always subverting the norm, I am. Doing things differently, taking alternate routes. Rebel that I am.

“I am... the gate,” Jesus says.

Even though too many of us are too familiar with gates, this scripture, one of the most well-known illustrations from our sacred stories, this story gives us a gate. This gate in this story: it's unlike the prohibiting, limiting, exclusionary gates in my story. As an openly gay minister, as a mother of children with disabilities, gate after gate has kept me and my family on the margins.

“I am the gate,” Jesus says. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

The gate is a boundary, not a barrier. The gate gives protection, not restriction. The gate is an extension of affirmation: you are welcome, you belong, you are so valuable, so sacred that you are sheltered within. Jesus protects. Jesus extends affirmation. Jesus lays his body across the breach.

So again Jesus says to us, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep.”

Friends, the sheep are not the gate. The sheep do not control the gate. Our neighbors, our families, religious leaders: they are not the gatekeepers. I’m not the gatekeeper. You are not the gatekeeper. The LGBTQ community is not the gatekeeper.

“I am the gate. Come in. Go out. Find pasture. Have abundant life.” We are not given gatekeeping!

Thank God, God gives us Jesus as a gatekeeper. A shepherd who loves and cares and nurtures and includes; a shepherd who searches for us and searches us out. Out! Quite the paradox. The gate is an invitation to be out, fully ourselves, living full, abundant life.

Regarding boundaries. I have an 18 and 14 year old in addition to the 2-year old—as a parent, I’m familiar with the misconception that boundaries are barriers and protection, restriction. My oldest would be okay if there were no fencing, no gates at all. The pasture, the world is hers. It is. And I love her so deeply that I provide boundaries. Boundaries are for protection, not punishment. Safety, preservation, rest. But still?

Freedom and security behind or within a gate? Shift with me. There is freedom because of the gate. Security because of the gate. Abundant life because of the gate. May we imagine gates differently...may we eliminate gatekeeping. Marginalized groups are often good at marginalizing others, erecting gates that exclude even though our lived realities align with others who encounter unwelcome. May gates be invitations to justice, may gates remind us of places of grace, may gates be entrances into community, inclusion, belonging, abundant life. John 10: The Good Gate.

Feel free to join me in The Serenity Prayer, changing the word “me” to “us.”

“God, grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; courage to change the things we can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

Know that no matter the size, shape, sign slapped on or voice connected with the world’s gates, you, each of you, belong. Black sheep, white sheep, brown sheep, purple, red, rainbow, polka dot sheep: I’m glad to be with you, alongside you, wandering with you, returning to the protection, affirmation and shelter of Jesus. Amen.

Before more shift happens with my flock here at home, I’m going to step out into the sunlight. I’ll watch where I step...