

**THE DOOR; JOHN 10:1-10; MAY 7, 2017, EASTER IV; THOMAS H. YORTY;  
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A distinguished biblical scholar when asked by seminarians to identify the most important attribute for interpreting the bible, said, a metaphorical frame of mind. She went on to say that scripture tends to be inherently metaphorical. Abstractions, propositions, reasoned discourse play little role in the way biblical witnesses present the divine. Symbols, metaphors, images, visions are the way of the biblical narrative.

And the most metaphorical of writers, the most 'symbolic' of preachers, is the author of the fourth Gospel. His account is a kind of spiritual Alice in Wonderland. It is as if Jesus is struggling to convey the richness of his identity to the limited, literal minds of his disciples. John's tenth chapter from which today's reading comes is full of metaphors and images whereby Jesus is represented to his followers in all of the richness and mystery of his identity.

John makes clear in verse six that though Jesus uses figures of speech to explain who he is, the disciples fail to understand him. Perhaps we can relate and claim some confusion ourselves about what Jesus means when he refers to himself as a shepherd or a gate or door. But first, it may help to say a word about the context in which John is communicating to the members of his church; then briefly consider what metaphors are and do; and finally gain some insight into what we gain from seeing Jesus as the gate or door. Context, metaphor, insight.

First context: John's gospel is the last of the gospels to be written – late at the end of the first century or early in the second. By this time tensions were running high between these new Christians or followers of the Way as they were known and their Jewish communities. These members of Jewish families and congregations were breaking away from the synagogue or raising questions about the practice of faith.

This is a familiar story – the splintering of religion. When a member of one religion splits off from her home group because she thinks that group is not properly practicing the faith she is branded a heretic. But when a person splits off from one religion to another religion he is labeled an apostate.

Heretics and apostates are low on the list of social standing but of the two the apostate is the lowest because his spiritual family of origin experiences his departure as total rejection and sellout.

This was the case with the community John is writing to. This band of new Christians is under siege and persecution from their own friends and families plus Rome.

Therefore, John's gospel is probably the most anti-Semitic book of the New Testament; we have very clear lines in the sand, like the commonly misunderstood, by liberal and conservative Christians, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the father except by me."

John seeks here to reassure and reaffirm the fledging faith of his little, hard-pressed, persecuted community. This is not a fixed formula for all time. This is the amoeba like affect of one faith emerging from another and the need for the new faith to separate itself from the old.

Second metaphor. Listen to what Tony Hoagland – one of our great poets and literary critics says about metaphor. There is something irreconcilably, neurologically primal about the act of metaphor. This primal wildness conceals it from us. In the hinterlands of the gray matter, where metaphors roam free, our data is all rumor, conjecture, and anecdote.

Because metaphorical speech is commonplace, because almost anyone can and does produce metaphors, we assume that metaphors are simple and transparent. And because it is a mental process that takes place in our own heads and leaves our own lips we assume we know how metaphors work.

But we do not. Invariably, Hoagland says, the only way to understand metaphors is by using another metaphor. It is a mystery hand going into a black mystery box. The head says, “Fetch me a metaphor, hand,” and the hand disappears under a cloth. A moment later, the hand reappears, metaphor on its extended palm. But despite the ease of the process we have only a vague idea of where the image came from; in fact, we don’t, neither does the hand.

What we do know is that metaphor is the raw uranium of poetry and as today’s reading and gospel illustrate metaphor is the stuff of spirituality – the urge to claim wild similarities is one of the earliest markers of the poetic spirit. Witness the great biblical poets: Isaiah’s holy mountain of peace and harmony; Amos’ justice rolling down like mighty waters; Jeremiah’s new law written not tablets of stone but on the hearts of God’s people.

Then Hoagland makes one more point worth our consideration. He says that the aim of metaphors is not always precise equivalence – in which the metaphor moves us away from a thing in order to see it better; metaphors can also engage another power equal to perspective – this is the power of fantasy or using the imagination not just to enrich the thing we are considering from a distance but to bend the thing itself into a different shape.<sup>i</sup>

When Hosea talks about Israel as a prostitute and God as a spurned, betrayed lover the very partnership of the chosen people with God is transformed from a parent/child relationship into the erotic, romantic love of a husband and wife.

Finally, what insight do we gain from seeing Jesus as a door or gate? No wonder the disciples didn’t get what Jesus was talking about when he refers to himself as a door or gate. When we press this passage for precise corollaries between the symbols and what they might mean we seem to be standing on a very slippery slope.

At one point, Jesus is the gate; then, he is the shepherd. At one point, thieves and bandits try to enter the sheepfold by climbing the wall; then they come to the gate to call the sheep, but their voice is not heeded.

These verses are no doubt a compilation of several sources of images that reveal the vulnerability of John’s community to “other voices” -- the Jewish communities who consider them apostates and the Roman

Emperor Nero who considers them a threat. But John says reassuringly the sheep will recognize the voice of the true shepherd. Suddenly, the image shifts from Jesus as shepherd – a more traditional metaphor of equivalence – to Jesus as the gate, a new reality-bending metaphor. If John's community feels like an easy target for thieves and bandits on the one hand; if they have come to hear in the voice of Jesus the true shepherd who calls them, then they are, in their synagogues a people who saw *no hope* apart from the Good Shepherd who comes not to kill the sheep and leave the flock in disarray *but to give fullness of life*.

Jesus' repetition of the phrase "I am the gate" distinguishes John's community apart from the synagogues they came from.

For these frightened, vulnerable followers of Jesus John offers precisely what they long for and need – nurturing, loving community for all who pass through the Jesus gate. The two metaphors of shepherd and gate convey that the identity of Jesus determines the identity of the community. John is saying that being in Christian community involves an intensely personal relationship with Jesus. It's hard to imagine anything else that would sustain those who have chosen to leave their parents' faith for a new faith at great risk to their very lives.

What would it take to lure you away from the faith in which you had been raised while incurring the wrath of your family, friends and the state? It would take a voice that spoke to your deepest self, your deepest need, your deepest brokenness and promised wholeness and blessing and life. This would be a voice that rang true in your heart of hearts, a voice you completely trusted.

And as the door of your old life closed or was slammed behind you as you left, a new door would have to open through which you could enter into a new world, a new community and a new life.

At a glance Jesus as the door seems a wooden, stiff, impersonal image but consider again those to whom he was speaking; they are abused, beaten, rejected, turn away – lost sheep in a desolate, dangerous wilderness who've come across a new sheepfold that promises protection, a new verdant pasture for feeding and rest – how to enter this place of refuge and restoration? When Jesus presents himself as the gate to this new life he comes as close as he can without forcing the lost sheep into the new fold; through me, he says, the gate is open, step into my threshold, pass into a new life of safety and wellbeing.

Our younger son who was in the Army for seven years, left last year to enroll as a sophomore at the University of North Carolina. He is, I am proud to say, on the dean's list after his first semester.

One of the greatest insights he has gained is that success in a given course is not just about knowing the material but knowing what the professor wants and expects. You might say that the professor herself is the door to the course in political science or economics or English literature.

In some cases he has had to change his writing style, in others he has had to read beyond the bibliography, with other professors he has had to sit in the front row and increase his participation in class.

To say that Jesus is the gate to new life is to say there are no list of laws or rules to follow; no walls to climb; no judgment or pecking order; all are welcome – just as they are. This is the George Herbert poem we talked about a few weeks ago – “Love Bade Me Welcome.” To pass through the Jesus gate is to let Jesus wash our feet, tell us stories, feed us, heal us, love us.

How? When we enter his church, his sheepfold, his new community and find him present in the fellowship of believers, in the teaching and service and justice work of the church he cares for and feeds us – that’s how.

If I have heard it once I have heard it a thousand times – people say ‘I belong to this church because of the people; because of the relationships; the caring I experience after a tough week or when I’m going through a hard time.’ And what you’re really telling me is, ‘I belong to this church because when I come here I meet Jesus in the Case Library where I am enlightened; in the Meet and Mingle conversation where someone understands me; in the choral anthem where my heart is lifted up and I come away with hope.’

When Jesus says he is the gate or door he is saying – let me welcome you into my pasture where you will find life and life abundant. That metaphor bends the idea of a door – from a slab of wood or metal to an open passage into a place you’ve never been before but somehow find familiar and know is exactly where you belong.

No wonder medieval and Renaissance artisans did their best to embellish and make enticing the doors to churches – to make them loving works of art to attract passersby who might stop, look, be fascinated and wonder what was inside.

That is as good news in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it was in the 1<sup>st</sup>. There are thieves and bandits, predators and the preyed upon. The epic battle continues between good and evil, light and darkness. But there is a place, a safe place where the broken are healed, the grieving are comforted, and lonely befriended, and those who hunger and thirst are fed. The name of the place is the church – Jesus is the door. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Tony Hoagland, *Real Soffistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016). 21ff.