



## Open the Gate/Abre la Puerta

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
25 September 2022

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Have I told you how good it is to be back among you? To worship with you. To speak and hear words of resurrection hope among you. To laugh with you. To listen to your stories. To stand here. To sit there among our children. All of it. It is so good. Last Sunday was glorious. Our worship sounded glorious. To feel the fullness of this community of believers in the sound of voices raised together to sing to the glory of God. We drank coffee, ate Cuban food, shave ice, tamales, and survived without the pizza truck. We talked; played volleyball; won prizes; climbed up and down inflatable slides and obstacle courses. And it was good.

GriefShare led by Brenda Lytle and Mary Lou Charapata is weeks into the hard work of supporting those who are walking with the loss of a loved one. The choir rehearsed. Handbells rang during practice. Small Group Bible Studies and book studies have been meeting. Pastor Tony is preparing for a new adult study in October. Young at Heart gathered for lunch and conversation. JOLT students and parents met last week. And it was so good. BLAST kicks off today. Kindergarten Stepping Stone happens today. Tutoring begins next Saturday for those who wish to learn more skills in speaking and reading English. Baptisms are scheduled for October. Green Meadows Worship happens next Sunday at 10:45. There will be weddings in October. CRASH begins on October 9<sup>th</sup>. A new member gathering is planned for those interested in joining our community. We expect the two newly remodeled bathrooms to be completed in the next few weeks. The Kitchen remodel is now in process. The unfolding story of the sale of the home gifted to our church is moving towards its listing on the market. A new member celebration is planned to celebrate new members who have joined this community in the past few years. We are preparing for our call committee to interview a pastoral candidate to walk with the children and youth of our community and alongside all of us. We are preparing to celebrate the completion of Edwin's 18-month internship and the journey of 10 9<sup>th</sup> grade confirmands. And that will just get us through the end of October. And it is so good.

Last Sunday, we opened the gates of Ascension and said "welcome home." There are so many people who said yes to help bring that event to life. Thank you for saying yes to whoever asked you to help. Thank you for saying yes to your faith and trust in God. Thank you for saying yes to the future of this community of believers. Yet we are indebted to Shirley Wehmeier who came up with the idea to envision a "welcome home" Sunday and who was busy behind the scenes working phone lines and food trucks. Honestly, we did not just open the gate, but possibly broke it from its hinges. I am pretty sure that is what Jesus would have done as well. And, if I remember correctly even with sabbatical brain, it is his example that we do our best to follow. I love the image of gates torn from their hinges. Mary sings of the mighty coming down from their thrones. Four friends break through a roof to help their paralyzed friend get to Jesus to be healed. Jesus breaks the rules and welcomes children. Jesus breaks the rules and speaks to a Samaritan woman. Jesus breaks the rules and challenges the religious authorities. Jesus broke the fourth commandment and healed on the Sabbath. Jesus welcomed a dying thief into the gates of paradise without asking for proof of his faithfulness. It turns out Jesus has been tearing gates off hinges all throughout his ministry.

I wonder about the gates we keep closed around us. And I wonder what we think is so important that we need to keep those gates closed. "There was a rich man who was 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, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. That is all I need from the good news of Luke this day. The story of a gate. The story of who is on either side of the gate. And the question as to why we need the gate at all.

During sabbatical, I spent time in the province of Quebec. Our hotel was on the edge of the old city of Quebec which in its original state was surrounded by a high wall. Quebec City started out as a fort. It turns out, to defend the fort – only small gates were built into the walls. Gates wide enough for a man or a horse leading a small wagon but not tall enough for a man on a horse. Though the defense was strong – the inability to move more traffic through those gates caused frustration and challenge to residents, visitors, and those who made their living transporting items in and out of the fortified city through those very small gates. So, the gates were widened. Then the gates increased in height. 400 years later the defensive gates are no longer necessary and now two 18-wheel trucks can drive side-by-side through those same gates. Imagine that?!



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When Jesus arrived at the river Jordan to be baptized by John, the gates that provided access to God were so small only the “approved” made it into the inner courtyard of the temple. To the religious leaders of the day, the gate protecting the worship of God had become more important than the worship of God. How easy it is for us to lose sight of the importance of what we are trying to love by protecting it into irrelevancy. Let me say that again. How easy it is for us to lose sight of the importance of what we are trying to love by protecting it into irrelevancy. When Jesus showed up and questioned the need for the gate – he was gifted a cross to die on. I am not sure much has changed some 2000 years later.

There are plenty of names to add to the list under the name of Jesus. Those who have questioned the need for the gate or pulled the gate from its hinges only to be met with a cross. Abraham Lincoln, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas Gandhi, John F. Kennedy, Yitzhak Rabin, Benazir Bhutto, Sitting Bull, Oscar Romero, Harvey Milk, Indira Gandhi, Christopher Stevens – each of them questioning one gate or another. Each of them given a cross for their words and actions. Regardless of their faith traditions, each of them followed the example of Jesus. Questioning the status quo – passionately desiring to widen the circle of welcome dismissing the need for the gate. The question is: can those of us standing at the gate; protecting the gate; reinforcing the gate – can we separate who we are as followers of Jesus from our identity as gatekeepers? “Because when you hide behind the gate of your privilege,” writes one pastor, “you cut yourself off from God’s grace.”

How difficult it is to maintain the gate when others no longer believe the gate is necessary. For so long, and in many places still today, there is a gate that keeps some from receiving holy communion at the altar of God. I still tell the story, though it has not been true for some time, about a few well-meaning members of Ascension who questioned why I would commune a child who had not yet received their first communion instruction. How could those children possibly understand what they are doing? I do not disagree – though I know they understand being excluded. And that was one gate I could not maintain any longer. Yet there are other gates we prop up – often I wonder why?

God knows the church has held on to too many gates – some we have been happy to tear from their hinges – others we hold fast. Why? Women as ordained leaders. Of course. Tear that gate from its hinges. People of color standing in equity with their white counterparts. Of course. Tear that gate from its hinges. Letting those who love each other get married. Of course. Tear that gate from its hinges. Sinners who repent of their sinfulness receive forgiveness. Of course. Tear that gate from its hinges. Speaking the truth of God to those who abuse their power. Of course. Tear that gate from its hinges. Some of that we do really well as a church. Other things still cause us to struggle. Sometimes the gate is renewed. Sometimes the gate is removed. Sometimes the gate is held up by only one hinge allowing some to move through and others to be held back. It turns out – Jesus has never been very fond of the gate. But somehow many of his followers still hold on to gates that Jesus ripped from their hinges thousands of years ago – not the least of which is the gate between death and life – the gate that stood as a rock rolled in front of a tomb where we believed the power of death had won only to have God tear the gate from its hinges and roll the stone away.

We strive to follow God’s example. In this place where democrats and republicans hold on to gates – we let go of those gates long enough to receive bread and wine in open and empty hands. In this place where English speaking and Spanish speaking brothers and sisters in Christ can still hold on to gates of fear and prejudice – we let go of those gates long enough to receive bread and wine as we worship together. In this place where old and young, gay and straight, broken and healed hold on to gates that label and divide us – we let go of those gates long enough to receive bread and wine as children of God. Here, we follow Jesus, the One who opens gates for each and every one of us and for every other single person who believes they are not welcome inside the gates of churches like this, hearts like ours, and the dwelling places of the Kingdom of God. My friends we have work to do. At God’s invitation. “Abre la Puerta.” Open the gate. Thanks be to God. Amen.