

At the Gates

Acts 16:9-15 and John 5:1-9

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First Presbyterian, Luling

Thursday before last, Charles and Arelis and I were at the Field Day at Luling Foundation Farm. Among other presentations, we learned some things—or rather, I learned some things, they may have already known them, from an agricultural lawyer. One of the things he talked about was fences. There are laws about fences, which makes sense I guess if you stop to think about it, which I guess I never had. If someone hits your cow with their pickup and hurts themselves in the process, the presence or absence of a fence may determine your liability. Depending on which county you live in. I think I have that right—the lawyer was moving pretty fast. One law which pertained even to me, a resident of the suburbs, was that my neighbor is under no obligation to split the cost of a fence between our properties. If I want a fence there, or want the fence replaced, that's fine; I can pay for it. They can help if they want to, but they aren't legally obligated to. Hmph.

A fence is pretty straightforward. It marks a dividing line, sometimes even creates a dividing line—like if you're cross-fencing your own property to make two different pastures, that fence is creating a division where likely none existed before. A fence is either mainly intended to keep some things in, or to keep other things out. That's a fence by itself.

What makes a fence interesting is a gate. Now a gate could take different forms. A cattle guard is a form of a gate—one that vehicles can pass through but cows, at least theoretically, cannot. Beth was just describing a “West Texas gate” to me last week, which is nothing but an additional fence post and some wire. There are aluminum gates and fancy iron gates with solar powered gate openers. A gate is a legitimate way through the fence, at least for any creature clever enough to operate whatever latch there is.

I'm yammering on about gates because for some reason, that's what caught my eye when I was reading through the passages for today. Both the Acts and the John readings make sure to mention that they occurred near the gates of each city: Philippi in Acts and Jerusalem in John. It was interesting, intriguing, maybe purely coincidental, likely not enough to build a sermon upon, but no matter. I decided to think about it and preach about it anyway.

So let's look at each passage and the mention of the gates in them and then we'll see what to make of it.

First, the Acts passage. The gate's role in it is probably more interesting than in the John. Paul is continuing his journeys to share the Gospel. This time, he's following a vision he has had, and doing so marks the first time that Christianity was proclaimed in Europe. They—it's not entirely clear who this involves, at least Paul and Barnabas and some unnamed person—anyway, they arrive in the city of Philippi. It's neither the least important nor the most important city of the region, but it's where the Spirit leads them to go. Paul says it's a leading city and a Roman colony. So much like everywhere else Paul has been, Rome is in charge. We also need to remember that Paul is a Roman citizen, which not everyone that lived in the Roman Empire was. As a citizen, he had some privileges that other people did not.

So they enter Philippi. Their practice up until now when they went to a new place had been to seek out the synagogue, so they could share the news about Jesus with their Jewish siblings. But they don't do this in Philippi. Perhaps there isn't a synagogue, though that would be unlikely, if it really was an important city.¹ Jews had spread to most of the large cities, and would have almost certainly established a synagogue in Philippi. But Paul has apparently heard word about town, that there is a

¹ Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, Newsome. Texts for Preaching, Year C. 315.

“place for prayer” just outside the city gate, near the river, and that is where they head on the morning of the sabbath. That people were gathering for prayer on the sabbath day certainly suggests that this group of people had Jewish roots, even if for some reason they chose not to worship in the synagogue, or were for some reason unwelcome there.

It is outside the city gate, by the river, that Paul and his companions encounter Lydia. Now Paul had expected to find people hungry to hear about Jesus in Macedonia, the region where Philippi is located. That’s what he had seen in his vision. But it had clearly been a man in Macedonia who had asked Paul to come, through the vision. This man disappears from the story after the vision, and Lydia is clearly the leader of the group gathered outside the gate at the place for prayer. Paul has come to the place where he expected to find a faithful man ready to welcome him, and instead he finds a faithful woman. He finds an unexpected person in the expected place, outside the gates.

To add to the geographical interest, Lydia is not from Philippi, not from Macedonia, at all. She’s from Thyatira, a city back on the Asian continent, in an area where the Spirit had prevented Paul from visiting. So Lydia is an outsider. Paul and his friends are outsiders. It’s not clear, but it seems reasonable to speculate that maybe all these people gathered in the place for prayer were outsiders to Philippi. Otherwise, they would have been inside the gates, at the synagogue.

It’s possible—I realize I’m speculating an unusual amount in this sermon—it’s possible that Lydia’s business interests have brought her to Philippi. Acts describes her as a dealer of purple cloth. Purple was a sign of wealth and power, because it was difficult and therefore expensive to create purple dye. Lydia’s status as a woman in business was interesting enough for Acts to describe her that way, but it doesn’t seem to make a huge deal of it. She was unusual but not completely unheard of.

Let’s leave our group at the prayer place outside the city gates and turn to the gospel story. This is a story that appears only in John’s gospel, though it has some similarities with other stories in the other accounts. There is a man who has lain beside this pool, and the pool is located near the Sheep Gate, in the city wall of Jerusalem. He lies there day after day after day. It is believed that after the water stirs, the first person into the water will be healed. But because he can’t move himself into the water, he is never the first person into the water, and he is never healed. But he hasn’t given up hope that somehow, someday, he might get to be the first one in and be healed.

Somehow, someday arrives in the person of Jesus, who is at this pool. Jesus asks him, “Do you want to be healed?” The man never really answers him; instead, he just whines about his predicament, how he has no one to help him into the pool. He is a thoroughly unlikeable character, actually. Jesus heals him, and the man goes off with no word of thanks whatsoever. He then rats Jesus out to the authorities, who are after him because he has healed this man on the Sabbath. If we ever were tempted to believe that Jesus blesses us because of how nicely we have behaved, or how faithful we have been, this story disproves that idea. This healing is completely, 100% from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, because this guy doesn’t seem to qualify in any way. Except that he needs to be healed. And that’s all it takes for Jesus to heal him. He needs it.

John takes care to locate this healing pool, near the Sheep Gate. The sheep gate was where the sheep were brought in to be sacrificed at the Temple. This pool might have been used in that process. Other than that, it doesn’t really seem to matter much to the progress of the healing story where exactly it takes place. That it is near the Sheep Gate seems unimportant, just a way for John to let people know which pool he is talking about, to give it a real location and more detail and thus help make it more believable.

Maybe so. Maybe the location of the healing of this unsympathetic guy near the city gates is just a coincidence. And maybe the group of people gathering in Philippi just outside the city gates is just because that’s where the breeze was the nicest on a Sabbath morning. Maybe.

But maybe there's something more to it. A gate, we said earlier, is a legitimate way through a fence, a permissible way to cross a boundary. And staying near a gate would be a way to be a little bit part of what's inside the gate and a little bit part of what's outside the gate.

For Lydia and the people praying, and then for Paul, they're a little outside the power structure of the city. She's wealthy, and he's a Roman citizen, so they are not without power. But they aren't in the inner circles, or they would be right there inside the city walls, inside the gate rather than outside it. Being near the gate is a way to say that they're different, that the allegiances they follow as followers of Jesus are going to be different, are going to be some inside-the-gate and some outside-the-gate activities.

As far as the man at the pool, let's think about Jesus's location rather than the man's. Jesus is for some reason at that pool, just inside the Sheep Gate. And maybe it's the same reason. Jesus moves freely outside the city walls and within them. He does not defer to the powers that be inside the gates, nor is he afraid of them. But neither is he isolated from those who are outside the gates.

As I think about our own location, here in the middle of our town, what if we thought of that sanctuary door as a gate. What if we were just as comfortable living our faith outside that door as we are inside it. If our faith is real, it can't stay inside the gates. We have to open that gate and cross into the outside. And we have to open the gate and come back inside to be renewed and encouraged and challenged and supported. And then we do it all over again.

Locating our faith at the gates is more challenging than staying put on one side or the other. We constantly have to readjust our listening and our speaking and comfort and discomfort. But it turns out that we come from a long line of people who hung out at the gates, and even follow one who said, "I am the gate."