

In today's Gospel Jesus says, "I am the Gate." Gates can reveal a lot about what lies beyond them. We have all come across a broken-down gate with overgrown weeds and brush around it. This often indicates that the area has been abandoned or in some cases the occupants may no longer have the financial means or are lacking the physical strength to maintain the area. We have all come across free swinging gates, which would lead us to believe that many people frequently pass through. Other gates have welcome signs with flowers planted around them and/or surrounded by another décor which would lead us to believe that what lies beyond is pleasant and welcoming. One of the most memorable gates in my lifetime I came across while running Cross Country when I was in High School. There was an invitational our school would participate in every year and what made this race so memorable is that about one hundred yards from the starting line all the runners had to pass through a gate that was just wide enough for only two people to pass through at a time. It doesn't sound so bad until you realize there are about 150 people at the starting line. So, you had to give it your all to get out in front of everyone to be one of the first at the gate. If you didn't you could get hung up for several minutes waiting to get through the gate. I will come back to this story in a minute.

Today's Gospel uses the word gate five times. Twice in the Gospel the word gate is personified where Jesus proclaims, "I am the gate. Jesus is the ever compassionate, welcoming, and protecting gate. In today's Gospel not only is he the gate, but he is also the Good Shepherd. Jesus is the one who always recognizes us and cares for us. The gate is a metaphor for Jesus' care, his openness to call, and to welcome everyone. The gate opens up a space of security, peace, and protection. Jesus clearly states in today's Gospel that he calls each of us by name giving everyone the opportunity to enter the gate so that all may have life and have it more abundantly. Jesus is always the Gate and always welcoming us, he will never fail to be there. Jesus is also calling us to be both a Shepherd and a Gate as well. He is calling on each of us to evangelize and welcome others into his Kingdom. We too should always tirelessly be the gate, never failing to be there.

When I think back to that cross-country race in high school, I realize just how symbolic that race was when reflecting on today's readings. As I mentioned you had to sprint to that gate to try and be one of the first there in order to get through and not have to wait several minutes to pass through. However, once through that gate you still had three miles to left to go. So, even though you were exhausted from that 100-yard sprint and wanted to do nothing more than stop and catch your breath, you still had a lot of running ahead of you. It was only through constant work and training for weeks before hand that allowed you to endure that race. Today, Jesus is calling on us to always be the gate and shepherd. There will be times when being the gate and shepherd will be full of challenges. The work at the beginning may be challenging, you are tired, you want to stop and rest, but you need to keep going. What Jesus is calling us to do is not an easy task. By continuously doing the work of Christ, we get conditioned so that we are prepared to take on the difficult challenges when we are confronted with them.

The second reading provides us practical direction for the shepherding and gate keeping that Christ calls us to. We are to be patient when we suffer for what is good as this is a grace

before God, because Christ also suffered for us. We are always to do good, return no insult or threat, and we are to hand ourselves over for the good of others. In all these ways our gates should be wide open and welcoming. The first reading also reminds us how our everyday actions in living out the Gospel are how we live out our baptism. When we embrace our baptismal commitment, we enter through the Gate of Christ, into a life of being gates and shepherds ourselves.

Jesus expects all of us to warmly welcome everyone into his Kingdom. We do this by responding to the cry of the poor, the downcast in our society, to those in hunger, and to those just needing to be shown love and compassion. There are so many ways we can do this. We can do this by supporting or helping with the St. Mary's food pantry. We can help support and volunteer at Jackson House, or at the Knights of Columbus, or get involved in the Hot Springs Catholic Youth Ministry. These are just to name a few. There is something for everyone.

Each of these groups I just mentioned become the welcoming gate in multiple ways. Not only do they welcome those they are directly working to serve, but as a group they also support each other. They offer encouragement to others when they are tired or feel overwhelmed. They help each other stay on the path Jesus has called us to. To all of our youth, I especially want to offer an invitation to join together with the Hot Springs Catholic Youth Ministry. You are all under such extreme peer pressure these days. Imagine how comforting it would be to have a group of friends who are subject to the same peer pressures and can provide you the positive reinforcement and encouragement to always make the right decisions, to live as Jesus has called us to. There will be times that you will be needing encouragement and a welcoming invitation through Christ's gate. Other times you will be the one welcoming and helping others build the strength to enter the gate. Isn't this exactly what Jesus is calling on us to do today, to provide everyone access through the gate, by welcoming those who feel they do not belong, removing the obstacles blocking the path for their entry, and help build the strength to those who need assistance to pass through?

As we gather to celebrate the Eucharist together, let us ask the Lord for the courage to follow Christ's example, even when at times it seems to come with a personal cost. May Christ inspire us when our heart goes astray or is filled with doubt. Finally, let us ask the Lord to give us the strength, courage, and love to welcome all through Christ's gate especially when their hearts go astray, they are filled with doubt, or when they feel unworthy.