

**The Gates of Peace**, May 22, 2022, St. Timothy, Burnaby  
Acts 16.9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21.10, 22—22.5; John 14.23-29

*Prayer*

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”

Sometimes, Jesus knows just what to say. In our gospel reading, Jesus is speaking to his disciples in what we know as the “farewell discourse”. He talks for many chapters straight during his final meeting with his disciples. If you have one of those Bibles where Jesus’ words are in red, this is a huge section in John with chapter after chapter of red letters. This comes from that section.

But in all of what he is telling his disciples: getting them ready for his departure, telling them he is going ahead of them, that he will send a “helper” after them, and that he is going to suffer and die—his words of peace must have been very reassuring. Sometimes Jesus knew just what to say. His words hit home. They struck a chord. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” In a time of doubt, in a time of trial and uncertainty and anxiety, Jesus’ words really do bring peace. Calmness. Security. Even when we hear those words today. Jesus’ words have power.

...but there are *other* times where it seems like Jesus really could have used a copy-editor. Or a marketing team. Just a little while ago, Jesus told his disciples that he was “The Good Shepherd”. Great stuff! Powerful. We know of several of his other “I am” statements from John’s gospel: “I am the way and the truth and the light.” “I am the bread of life.” “I am the true vine.” —that one was not as good as some of the others, but then there was “I am the gate for the sheep.” That one was really lacking in that certain...feel that so much of Jesus’ other statements had.

But why am I bringing that up at all? That’s not the passage that we were looking at today.

But we did look at *gates* today, in *two* readings. So perhaps we should take some time to look into gates.

We are all familiar with the basic function of gates: they keep out the undesirables. The thieves, the vultures, the enemies. Sometimes we use gates to close off or protect a certain area from those that shouldn’t be there, like a toddler gate at the top of the stairs. But we *also* use gates to keep things *in*. To create helpful division so we can tell which is the *in*-group and which is the *out* group.

That’s probably why the worshippers were found *outside* the gates of the city in our reading from Acts. It’s such a subtle line that it’s easy to miss, but the narrator says that, once they arrived in Philippi in Macedonia, they “went outside the gate by the river where [they] supposed there was a place of prayer.” If you’re not paying attention, you might miss that. They had to *leave* the city to find the place of prayer, but *they thought it was there, even without anyone telling them!* That would suggest that this was common. That these new groups of Christians *regularly* met in those kinds of places, just outside the city walls, where there was a river. Very convenient for baptisms. But also, deliberately *outside* the city walls. Outside as in “not officially endorsed” by the city or its inhabitants. It seems that it was common for these new Christian places of prayer to be operating on the margins. Somewhat away from the watchful eye of the authorities, but close enough to the city for others to join, to participate.

The early church thrived in this location—on the margins. And this is the place where our Christian Church is moving again—not officially endorsed by The State, not protected by the state, but close

enough so that everyone who needs to know about it, can find out. Not part of the mainstream, but accessible. However, for the vast majority of the people, as today, it was not a part of their everyday life.

Those gates of the city are quite significant. They decide what is on the *outside* and what is on the inside. And the Christians were *out*.

That's not something many of us are familiar with, especially in our identity as Christians. We are used to being the dominant religion, the dominant ideology. The colonizers; the imperialists. We are used to feeling like we are at the centre of the life of society. And from that position of dominance and power, we have a unique perspective on the role of the gates. The gates keep the riff raff out. The gates keep the "good people" in, and separate from those outside. The gates control and monitor the economic life, the trading partners inside and outside of the gate.

But it is easy to forget about *another* important aspect of those gates. Those gates also provided *safety*.

In the era of walled city states, each city state had a temple, usually built to a god or goddess who was worshipped in that area and who had the responsibility of keeping the people safe from others and possibly for other things as well—fertility, maybe, or rains for growth of crops.

But those city states *also* had walls and gates. And it was the walls and gates that kept the city safe. During the day, a lookout could see for miles if there was an approaching army. They could warn the city's defenses to prepare for battle—and *close the gates*! At nighttime, when the lookouts *couldn't* see that far, the gates were kept closed so an advancing army couldn't sneak into the city unawares.

For those of us who feel like *insiders* (and maybe it has something to do with being city dwellers), it is easy to forget this other role of the gates. We can get used to feeling protected all the time. When the gates are open, the sentries are on the wall. When they can't see an approaching army, the gates are closed, keeping us safe.

...But what about those *outside* the walls? Those living on the margins. The farmers, the traders, the travellers. The poor people who couldn't afford to live inside the walls. What did the gates mean to *them*?

For those who lived outside the walls, the gates being closed meant that they were at the mercy of God. They didn't have the walls to protect them. They didn't have an army to keep them safe. For them, for the majority of the people, they were *outside* the safety of the gates *most of the time*. For them, *open gates, not closed gates* was the symbol of safety. The symbol of belonging. For them, if the gate was *open*, that meant that there was still time. Time to get away from the beasts of the fields. Time to escape the advances of the enemy. And, on a more practical level, they still had a chance to trade. To buy food. To sell their wares. To make deals. Because once that gate was closed, all bets were off. They were all on their own.

In this context, the vision that is shown to the narrator in the book of Revelation is powerful. The new city of Jerusalem coming out of heaven. A city that doesn't have a temple in its centre because "its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." A city that "has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb." But most importantly, in this new city, "its gates will never be shut by day - and there will be no night there." The gates will *always* be open. Perpetually signalling that safety is to be found there. That this is a place of refuge for *all*.

So it is fitting that in today's gospel reading Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid," or, as I mentioned earlier, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you."

Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" is full of many predictions and preparations for his coming betrayal, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. He knows that he will be going away from them, but he has promised the Advocate, the Holy Spirit that he will send.

But he has also given them peace. Peace that the world cannot give. Peace that can only come from God—the kind of peace that would assure everyone that they have not been forgotten. That the doors have not been shut to them. That even though they may have been operating on the margins, that God has assured them a safe haven from the terrors of the world around them. That God has prepared a sanctuary. A place of peace. *Shalom*.