

“Enter by the Gate”  
April 26, 2026  
Scripture: Psalm 23; John 10:1-10

The other night, Beth and I were watching an episode of “Finding Your Roots,” hosted by Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Have you seen that? This episode featured three celebrities: William H. Macy, Mary Steenburgen, and Ted Danson. They all had pretty fascinating family histories, which I guess if you dig deep enough, we all do, but none of the stories in my family’s history are ever as interesting as the ones told on that show. But one in particular stuck with me in light of this reading.

Ted Danson is the direct descendant of a woman named Anne Hutchinson. Some of you may have heard of her. I had, but didn’t really know her story very well. She was born in Britain in 1591 as Anne Marbury, and in 1612 married William Hutchinson. They became followers of a Puritan preacher named John Cotton who left England for America in 1633 as part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Hutchinsons followed with their 15 children a year later.

Not long after they arrived Anne began hosting women’s prayer meetings which included interpreting scripture and offering commentary on the sermons preached by the various clergy in the colony. Her meetings became quite popular and began attracting men as well as women. In the course of her commentary, she began accusing certain ministers, not all of them, of preaching a gospel of works rather than a gospel of grace. Well, you can imagine how that went over with those preachers, and eventually, she was charged with inciting schism in what’s called the “Antinomian Controversy,” which said inward grace is more important than obedience to outward moral laws. Her trial resulted in her expulsion from the colony in 1637, a mere three years after she arrived. She and her family first went to the Rhode Island colony of Providence where the famous dissenter Roger Williams was establishing religious freedom. But a few years later, after her husband died in 1641, she took several of her children to a region even farther from the Massachusetts Bay Colony out of fear that it might try to expand and absorb Rhode Island. Unfortunately, in 1643 she and the children still with her were killed in an attack by the Native population.

During her trial she was accused of being “a woman that hath had a great share in promoting and divulging of those opinions that are causes of this trouble, and...you have spoken divers things as we have been informed very prejudicial to the honor of the churches and ministers thereof, and you have maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex....” The whole transcript is on-line, but a little hard to follow at times. The issue wasn’t just what she was teaching; it was also who she was teaching. She was teaching men, and that wasn’t tolerable. In the end, though, she was banished for persisting in making claims about what the ministers were teaching and denying that’s what she’d done.

One of the things Jesus is accused of is leading people astray by teaching things about God the religious authorities found intolerable. Just prior to this passage, in chapter 9 of John’s gospel, Jesus has healed a man born blind and the controversy that ensued led him to observe, “I

came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” Some Pharisees who heard him responded, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” And he says to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.” Chapter 10 is a continuation of that exchange with the Pharisees.

So, we find Jesus here explaining to religious leaders what really determines who lives in the circle of God’s love and who does not. And it all has to do with response to God’s voice. He uses a metaphor of a shepherd with sheep. And he implies that there are those in their society who are influencing the people like thieves trying to steal sheep from the fold. He’s accusing these religious authorities of misleading the people. It’s important to recognize Jesus does not say Judaism itself is the problem, only how it’s being interpreted to the population.

That’s a really important distinction. Passages like this, where Jesus is facing off with religious opponents, are often used to discredit Judaism as a whole. They’re often cited as evidence that Jesus’ teachings are meant to displace the teachings of Torah, that Jesus is replacing Judaism with Christianity. That is not what’s happening. He is critiquing the religious leaders, much as Anne Hutchinson was critiquing the ministers in the Colony in her day, but he’s not seeking to overthrow them, any more than she was.

Recently I’ve been reading a section of a book by the spiritual theologian Diogenes Allen, who taught theology at Princeton Seminary for years, titled *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*. He has a chapter toward the end of his book called “A Christian Theology of Other Faiths.” His bases his argument in the work of a French poet and Christian mystic Simone Weil. In her writings, which are scant because she died quite young, Simone Weil talks about the distinction between gravity and grace. Gravity is a universal force that affects all matter and we all experience physically but for Weil, it’s also understood as the weight we carry as human beings who are motivated by the need for self-protection and gratification, anything that compels us to act in ways that elevate ourselves over others. It’s the sad condition under which we all live and it’s expressed in thousands of destructive acts that do harm to ourselves, to our environment, and to people around us.

The men who put Anne Hutchinson on trial were acting out of gravity, no matter how religiously motivated they may have been, it was this force of gravity that drove them. In the same way, the religious leaders around Jesus are acting out of gravity in their response to his teachings and his acts of healing. Their concern is to contain what Jesus is doing and keep it under control. If you read the story in chapter 9 of John’s gospel, their response to the healing of the man born blind is first to claim he was never blind to begin with, then to insist Jesus could have had nothing to do with his healing. But when the man refuses to renounce Jesus, they expel him from the synagogue. They are bound by the gravity of their worldview and cannot accept any other interpretation of the world.

In Jesus the gravity of the world is met with grace. The two come together on the cross. It’s in that sense that Jesus is the gate to the world of grace. When he says, “I am the gate,” he’s not placing himself above those around him; he’s offering himself as the means through which we can enter the circle of God’s love, the circle of grace. But we do that only by leaving the gravity of the world behind. It’s a call to give up our need for self-protection and our desire for

gratification. It's an invitation to live for others, for those around us who are ground down by gravity and are longing for grace.

I suspect that's why Anne Hutchinson's prayer meetings became so popular so quickly among the women, and apparently many men, in her community, and why her message was so threatening to the religious authorities in the Colony. There are many elements in our society today that want to impose a rigid and constrictive interpretation of God and morality on our behavior, that want to keep us creatures of gravity. But if we trust the teachings of Jesus we find in the gospels, we learn we are meant to be creatures of grace. We're meant for more than hiding behind walls of division and hatred and fear. We're meant to live for others, to cross boundaries, to welcome strangers, to offer hope. When we enter by the gate that is Christ and immerse ourselves in his presence by living as creatures of grace, then we discover abundance of life.

Real living happens when we live for others. And it's really not very hard to do. When we put ourselves in another's shoes, when we regard them with empathy, taking on their pain and their struggle, we become imitators of Christ, entering the sheepfold by the gate. If we trust the One who goes before us, the One who leads us in and out, the One who calls us in love, we can move from gravity to grace and be free of our fear. And when we do, when we enter by the gate, then we will truly start to live.

Amen