“On the Other Side of the Gate: A Sermon on Crossing Borders”

To survive the borderlands, says the poet, you must be *sin fronteras*, be a crossroads. And though the poet is writing with an eye toward the southwestern border, Thousands of miles away from us, She has us in mind, too, all the way here in New England. Just to be clear, this is not a sermon about the issue of immigration, At least not explicitly. This is a sermon about us – about you and me, About the borders we set around us, About the dance we do between safety and risk, between sanctuary and outreach. About the borderlands between our towns, about class, About mixing with people like us and mixing with people not like us, About getting outside our comfort zone. Is this a sermon about too much? Probably. But I’ll ask anyway: What are the borders set around you? What are the gates you put up telling you who is in and who is out? Do you have a comfort zone? Do you place a high premium on staying comfortable? Or is there something on the other side of that gate, In that land of risk, in that land of the unknown and the uncomfortable, that you need to learn?

I want to tell you about the neighborhood I grew up in. Back in the 1970’s my parents moved to what Was then considered by their extended families a ‘risky’ section Of St. Louis. It was called Ames Place, and even though it stood just outside of Washington University – a well known school founded, to plug us, By William Greenleaf Eliot, the first minister of St. Louis’ Unitarian church – The neighborhood was considered risky because it was surrounded by what Many others considered ‘danger.’ What was danger? Well, we were told danger was crime - You’ll get your bike stolen, was the word on the street. And we were told that danger was the strip two blocks away that now is a hip urban center of shops and restaurants but back then was a favorite hangout for what were called ‘the Harley guys,’ – and knowing we have some of those here, I’m sorry for the offense.

But I suspect the danger some were referring to was also the unspoken Danger of difference, of ‘the other’ – the difference being that around my neighborhood, which was primarily white, There were neighborhoods which were primarily African-American. And some of these neighborhoods were also poor, which meant that
Not only did race separate my neighborhood from the others,
But so did class, so did the culture around money and privilege and who’s got it
And who doesn’t.
And in a metaphor that now years later feels much more
Like an exclamation point on all this separation, this difference
There stood at the end of my street,
Just like the end of all the streets in Ames Place,
there stood iron, ornate, tall, chained, old, padlocked, and strong….gates.

And aside from accomplishing all the goals these gates were put there to achieve –
Cut down on traffic! We were told.
Keep people from speeding!
- the other impact these gates had, and now I will speak only personally,
Was to send the message
That on one side there was an ‘us,’ there was ‘safety,’ there was ‘trust’
they were ‘people like me;’
and on the other side there was a ‘them;’
There was ‘danger,’ there was ‘suspicion,’
there lived people who were different.

To survive the borderlands, says the poet, we must be sin fronteras,
We must be a crossroads.
But in my neighborhood the thing you were learning was that to survive
The borderlands, you must be a tall, iron, strong, chained, padlocked…gate.
And this morning I find myself returning in memory to these gates because
I’m wondering what the hidden and not so hidden gates are for us,
In what ways we communicate who is out and who is in,
Who is us and who is them.

And do you know how, when you wonder about something,
Your whole posture changes, how instead of leaning forward
In a posture of action and activity, when you wonder about something
You lean back and lift your eyes upward and you look around
With what at its best we can call curiosity and openness
Rather than judgment or defensiveness?
That is what I invite you to join me in doing, just leaning back
And wondering with me as we ask about the gates around us.

And so to begin I’m wondering in particular what it means
that our church is in one of the
Wealthiest towns in the state, second only to Weston by my count,
But that around us, and now I’m thinking of parts of Framingham and Milford,
Are towns that struggle the most.
I’m wondering what that fact means for us - what actions, if any, it compels;
What lessons, if any, it has to teach;
What responsibilities, if any, it carries.
What burdens, if any, it brings.
What opportunities, it any, it offers.

And I’m wondering why even though we have congregations in Milford, in Framingham, in Dorchester, in Roxbury, Why people of color and people with blue collars are to a large extent not in the pews? I’m wondering the same about us, our zip code aside. I’m wondering what kinds of gates we progressive religious people put up that keep other people out? I’m wondering why some ask why we don’t have more diversity in our congregations, and then at the same time are unwilling to make changes That would attract that diversity? So with my colleague Fred Small I’m wondering: do we celebrate diversity, so long as everyone conforms to our culture – eating the same food, listening to the same radio stations, Speaking the same accent, voting the same political party, worshipping the same way?

And next I’m wondering why my town of Holliston is so homogenous, While some other towns around me are so…not. I’m wondering why my daughter comes home to me and says, Looking at a picture of her aunt, my adopted younger sister Anna who is Vietnamese, “how come there aren’t many people with her skin color in my school?” And outside of quoting her demographic trends and pulling out those sociology books from college I’m wondering what do I say? How do I explain? How do I tell her the town I’m raising her in is leaving her unprepared for the kind of country She will be living in, Where in 2050 Asian-Americans will double in size, And Latinos will be 30% of the population, And white Americans, currently 75% of the population, will drop to 45%. “To live in the Borderlands, sweetheart, means you are neither white, Hispania, India, negra, Espanola, ni gabacha, eres mestiza. To live in the Borderlands means you be sin fronteras, without borders, Be a crossroads! I was to say to her. But is that what I’m teaching my child in these towns? Is that what you’re teaching yours?

And so this is what I’m wondering, we who live in borderlands, But sometimes pretend as if we didn’t, sometimes are allowed and enabled To pretend because our suburbs are so insulating, so gated even if we don’t have large, iron, padlocked gates at the end of our streets to tell us, This is what I’m wondering:
What is the religious challenge facing us in these lands of borders and fences?
What is the challenge for us in this land that asks the President to
Prove with a birth certificate he is one of us?
What is the challenge in this land that overwhelms us with messages about us and them?

And in my posture of curiosity and memory I find myself
Again going back again to those gates of my youth,
Now I am in high school, now I am older,
now I am not as wise as I think I am.
But something shifts in my sophomore year when,

as part our Catholic school’s ‘crossing boundaries’ program we are taken
by the religion department teachers first to St. Rock’s,
the Catholic church that was deep in what many around me
said was in the ‘danger zone’ of St. Louis,
but that once there I discovered was simply outside our ‘comfort zone”
of some in St. Louis.

And when you ask why? Why is that Nathan?
Can I say, can I say with a confessing heart,
that it was outside my comfort zone
because it was an all black church, because we were the only white faces there,
because even though it had the familiar Catholic liturgy,
it also had different music, and the priest gave his homily from the floor!
And at the end they actually had a band that played loudly,
putting the Rock behind the name St. Rock’s?
Can I confess that I was uncomfortable by all this difference,
And by feeling so conspicuous, and so out of my element?
And can I confess that feeling uncomfortable
Wasn’t altogether a bad thing?
Because I could feel myself beginning to straddle that gate,
I could feel myself being stretched,
I could feel myself asking if there wasn’t more to this life than feeling safe.

And that was not all!
Oh no, that religion department of ours had a plan!
They had arranged with some of those parishioners for us to
Visit and lunch in their homes later that day.
So we went into these neighborhoods,
for many of us it was first time we had been there,
and this is key: we went not as the helpers or as the advantaged,
but simply as guests, as recipients of hospitality,
as gate crossers meeting other gate crossers.

To survive the borderlands you must be sin fronteras,
You must be a crossroads.
And on that day I learned what that land of crossing looked and felt like –
It was uncomfortable, there was awkward silence over the corn
And the macaroni salad, there was a lot of looking around the room.
But there was also a lot of listening.
What is it like to live here? We asked each other
What is like to live there?
What is your biggest hope right now? What is your greatest challenge?
What does your faith inspire in you?
These were the questions we asked and answered each other
with prodding by our teachers.
And no one got a pass. Everyone had to answer.
Because on the other side of the gate, in the borderlands
I was learning there is no ‘us’ and there is no ‘them.’
There is only listening…and only stories and only ambiguity and
Contradiction and the need for humility and the longing for understanding
And the freedom to share pain done to us and done to ourselves,
and the midnight prayers for comfort and release from whatever our burdens.
Did I leave that house, the St. Rock parish a changed person,
A person now living on the other side of that gate?
And my answer is that it is taking me a lifetime to learn
The lessons of that day.

So this is the religious challenge before us, I think – to not pretend.
To not pretend as though we are called to do more than live
in suburbs of safe keeping.
To not pretend, as my colleague G. Smith says,
that staying safe is more important than making a difference.
To not pretend, in another line of his that spoke to me this week,
that we have it and they don’t,
And if we don’t protect it with big gates, it will be taken from us.
To not pretend there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them,’
A ‘deserving’ and an ‘undeserved.’
To not pretend that we don’t live in a land of borders,
And that the choice of being a crossroads or being a gate is set
Before us every day.

And if you’re sitting there wondering, why is Nathan pushing
The pulpit on this theme today?
We have new members! We have annual meeting!
Where is the warmth?
Know that it is because in a land of borders, and on a day
When we visit the mission and vision of our church,
I believe we are called by our faith to be a crossroads people –
Accepting of difference, arguing not concerning God,
Asking how we can we be welcoming to people not like us,
asking what is fair, asking where is justice,
asking what does it mean to reach across our zip codes,
Asking how can we reach outside our comfort zones,
Asking what is on the other side of that gate, wherever and whatever
That gate is for you.

To live in the borderlands we must be sin fronteras,
We must be a crossroads.

Amen.