

"I Am the Door"

John 10:1-10

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This morning, we are dedicating our new front doors for our historic church sanctuary, a structure that was originally erected way back in 1850 (although the church itself was originally founded a half-century earlier). That they have been painted red, like the front doors of the Pleasant Unity Church, is not without symbolic significance. For instance, in Feng Shui--a Chinese philosophy in which the arrangement and color of objects in a room relates to the flow of energy--the front door is known as the "Mouth of Chi" where energy enters in. Thus for those who believe in Feng Shui, a red door creates welcoming energy. In early America, if a family had a red front door, tired travelers traveling by horse and buggy would recognize it as a place of welcome, an abode in which they could come in and rest and even spend the night, while in Scotland, a red door had a less benign meaning in that it symbolized that the homeowner had finally paid off his or her mortgage.

But a red door also bore deep RELIGIOUS connotations for in Biblical times, it signified "protection." In the Old Testament, the Hebrew slaves were instructed to smear the blood of a lamb on their front doors to protect their first born from the angel of death, hence the origin of "Passover," one of the great festivals observed by the Jews. In old Catholicism, churches painted the doors of the church red to represent the blood of Christ and that once you passed through those doors, it indicated you were now standing on holy ground. Some even believed that a red door was a type of talisman, protecting the home's occupants from any and all evil.

Now practically speaking, a door is simply a means by which we allow a person to enter a particular structure whether is a home, a school or a place of work. While living in California back in the 1970's and 80's, I shared a house with a bunch of single guys, most of whom were ALSO planning on becoming ministers. We always practiced an "open door" policy which meant that throughout the week and even on weekends, you'd never know who might show up to spend a few days with us. One day, someone showed up at our door and he ended up staying for the next three years. Well, we all look back now and agree it was not just a CRAZY time, it was also one of the BEST times of our lives.

I've tried to adhere to that same principle in the years since--of practicing hospitality through an "open door" policy--and I consider myself fortunate to have a wife like Rose who shares that SAME philosophy. As I'm fond of saying, God's greatest gifts always come to us, not in the form of material things such as our homes or cars or the size of our bank account but in HUMAN BEINGS as God is never MORE present than in and through those who express an OPEN and GENEROUS and WELCOMING heart, ESPECIALLY when it is directed towards the most needy and vulnerable among us. That's why the practice of "hospitality" played such a central role in the life of Christians and in the early Church.

Probably the GREATEST SYMBOL of an "open door" is the Statue of Liberty. As someone who spent much of his life in New Jersey, having been born and raised there, I practically grew up within its shadow. When it was dedicated at the end of the 19th century, the Jewish American poet Emma Lazarus saw it as a beacon to the world, an "open door" through

which America's future would pass. Between 1820 and 1920, approximately 34 million persons immigrated to the United States, three-quarters of whom stayed permanently. For many of these newcomers, their first glimpse of America was the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor. Her famous sonnet *The New Colossus* was written to help raise money for the pedestal, but it also captured what that statue came to mean to the millions who migrated to the US seeking freedom. Inscribed upon a bronze plaque mounted inside the pedestal's lower level, it is the closing lines of that poem that are especially inscribed upon our minds and our hearts:

*Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

And so that statue in the harbor signified for the world that America was a "golden door" for it provided so many people with hope, with the possibility of a new beginning as it did for my mother and her parents--my grandparents--who sailed beneath that lamp in 1926 to escape the ravages of a crippling depression that beset Germany in the years following the first World War; and as it did my grandparents on my father's side who immigrated from England at the end of the 19th century. Yes, the opportunity was there, that is, if they were willing to work hard, take risks, and make sacrifices in the process.

On the OTHER hand, if doors can be inviting and welcome people IN, they can ALSO EXCLUDE and thus keep people OUT- often for reasons of fear or safety's sake. I'm old enough to remember Gov. George Wallace standing before the front doors of the University of Alabama in June of 1963 vowing "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever" in an attempt to block the entry of two black students from enrolling there. It took an action by the Attorney General to finally bring about integration there when he ordered the National Guard to go in and enforce the order. With television cameras rolling, General Henry Graham walked up to Wallace and told him, "Sir, it is my sad duty to ask you to step aside under the orders of the President of the United State." Only then did the Governor move aside. Therefore, the attempt by someone to keep the doors of a major public university shut to a couple solely on the basis of their race and thus deprive them of their most fundamental rights was averted.

Our New Testament lesson for this morning is one of the famous "I Am" statements Jesus makes in the book of John, the one in which he says "I am the door (or the gate) of the sheepfold" which the shepherd guards in order to protect the sheep throughout the night. In Jesus's day, the majority of shepherders were relatively poor and their sheep pens quite simple and rustic. They would locate a depression in the earth or beside a hill and then pile rocks around it one atop another to create a kind of stone corral. Briars and thorns were then fixed along the top to discourage predators and trespassers from entering. While the enclosure could insulate them from the wind some, it was unable to protect them from the cold or rain as there was no roof over it. There was no door to speak of either but rather the entranceway consisted of a small opening for the sheep to enter and exit by. At night, the shepherd would sleep across the entrance while a small fire burned just outside it to keep him warm and to ward off any animals. Thus, no sheep could leave or intruder enter without it first having to get past him. This is why Jesus says, "I am the door," because he remains the only thing that stands between life and death, between security and danger for US, HIS sheep.

When we look at his life and ministry, Jesus did anything BUT close doors on people. Rather, he was constantly THROWING THEM WIDE OPEN by practicing "radical inclusivity," that is, by welcoming any and all (and that included the UNLIKELIEST of persons) into his own family. By inviting them to follow him, he made them feel accepted and loved, which for SOME meant making them feel HUMAN for the first time in their lives. The most ostracized and excluded of groups in the ancient world were embraced and accepted once they met Christ whether they were lepers or prostitutes, Samaritans or tax collectors, demoniacs or paralytics. No one was ever too bad or too contagious to be shut out from either his Kingdom OR his Church.

As members of his body, the Church, and by extension members of his Kingdom, we must constantly guard against becoming narrow and sectarian and exclusionary; we must watch against acting like a secret society or private club which only lets certain people in and shuts the door on everyone else. Early on in my ministry, I paid a visit to one of the Elders who had served on the search committee which had called me to that church. I remarked to him how as I got to know the community better, I was surprised by the lack of ethnic diversity or persons of color either in the town or as members of any of the local churches. I asked him if he thought it strange and he said, "Well Dave, it's not strange to US- we just don't want them here." In other words, when it was indicated to me during my interview with the search committee that they wanted to see the church grow, what they REALLY meant was that they wanted to see it grow with persons JUST LIKE THEMSELVES, and you can bet that if JESUS CHRIST had been the door keeper of that community and of those churches, it quite possibly might have looked a whole lot DIFFERENT.

Another church I ministered at was a rather large complex situated in an ancient cemetery that went back over three hundred years and surrounded by a high brick wall. This reinforced the impression of a brick fortress, not so much to let people in as to keep them out. In order to gain entrance, you had to show yourself in front of the camera and the secretary would then determine whether it was safe enough to let you in or not. The area around it was 90% Afro-American as were the hundreds of persons who walked past its front gates every single day, and although the church operated a food pantry and brought the homeless in to live for a week at a time once or twice a year, there was considerable anxiety about the neighborhood. One of the first things I did was to begin reaching out to the youth who lived in the tenements around our facility. On Sunday nights, I opened the church up for basketball, ping pong, and other assorted games that also included a short Bible study. I know that some of the members had a heart attack over that, thinking that these young black kids would be all over the building, scuffing the carpets and dirtying up the walls. "Don't be surprised if you begin to find things missing," one of them warned me.

Over time, I got to know those kids so well that after they got off from school, they would head straight on over to the church, knock on my office window, and plead, "Pastor Dave, come on out. We want to talk to you." Eventually we had over 70 youth packed into our gym every Sunday night. When I got ready to leave that church, the kids organized a surprise party for me and even brought their parents to introduce them to me. One parent after another told me how the church had made such a difference in their children's lives and how appreciative they had become for my personal friendship. However, I was disappointed to learn that after I left that church, the program was suspended. What was most interesting was that throughout my ministry there, there was not a single incident of vandalism yet in the months AFTER my

departure, several were reported. Of course, you can guess who those same members wanted to blame it on- "It must be one of those kids Dave brought into our church when he was here!" they said. Thus, where Christ had opened a door to a number of the youth in the area by building relationships between them and the church, the church responded out of her fear by SHUTTING it again.

The late Dr. Arthur Caliandro was the minister who followed that celebrated preacher, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, as the pastor of the famed Marble Collegiate Church in New York City. In his final sermon before retiring from that prestigious pulpit, Dr. Caliandro wanted to sum up just what the gospel had meant to him, to distill for his parishioners the essence of what his fifty years in the ministry represented. He said, "Really, what it is all about is LOVE. That which every human being, every one of us, needs and wants more than anything else is to be in a relationship, or in relationships, where we feel safe." And then he added this: "Relationships where we are understood, accepted, affirmed and forgiven."

Dr. Caliandro was right on- there is nothing MORE a human being needs or wants than to live in a relationship where we feel UNDERSTOOD and ACCEPTED and AFFIRMED and FORGIVEN, a place where we can all come and know that we will always feel SAFE. That's where the CHURCH comes in. When Christ told his disciples that he was the door or the gate of the sheepfold, he was saying that he ALONE would determine who could enter and who could not, and his determination was that as long as he stood in the doorway of God's Kingdom and thus of his CHURCH, NO ONE would ever be excluded, NO ONE would ever be denied entrance or kept out. The CHURCH would be the one place persons could come--Sunday, Monday or ANY day of the week--and know that he or she would find forgiveness, acceptance, affirmation, and love. If the church of Jesus Christ as the "Body of Christ" is to represent him faithfully and in all fullness then it must ALWAYS be a church family opened to EVERYONE, discriminating against NO ONE. There can never be any second-class Christians here. The doors will never be locked to certain persons or groups but flung wide open so that EVERYONE may feel loved, forgiven, accepted, and safe REGARDLESS of age or sex or color or ethnicity or disability or sexual orientation. As long as I am pastor here and as long as this church continues to call itself "Christian," it will be and it MUST be a "haven of rest" for EVERYONE, that we will strive to accept people just AS THEY ARE and let God deal with the rest or else we're NOT the church but rather its COUNTERFEIT, a pale imitation of one and no better than the thief or robber who tries to steal into the sheepfold.

I want to leave you with one more story- an incident that occurred while I was ministering in northwestern Indiana a couple of years ago. One afternoon, I received a phone call from a woman who after introducing herself, said that she had been encouraged to call me by some friends who lived in the area. It turns out she was a gay woman who lived with her wife and both were teachers in the local school system. They were also both Christians and members of a Methodist church until the congregation became so small, it was forced to close. She explained how subsequently, they had visited a number of churches since but that everyone of them said the same thing, that because they were both lesbians and "living in sin" together, they could quietly come and attend the services on Sundays, but they weren't allowed to be involved in the life of the church and certainly not become members. They were about to give up on church ENTIRELY until someone suggested to them MY name.

I promised her that if she visited the following Sunday, they both would be MORE than welcomed at my church and by the members of our congregation. Well sure enough, the following Sunday, both of them were in attendance. Afterwards, I invited them to have lunch with Rose and me so that I might get a chance to know them better and hear their story. We had a fabulous time and the next Sunday and every Sunday thereafter, both became regular attendees at our services. Eventually, they asked to become members and we happily brought them in. One day, one of them called me asking for prayer. She had just returned from the doctor's office where they discovered a cancerous tumor. We prayed together, after which I assured her that if there was anything I could do, we would be there for them both. Soon after, she had to have surgery and throughout the operation, Rose and I sat with the rest of her family. When she was eventually sent home, we had members of the church bring meals to her and her wife for that first week. She was so appreciative for everything.

Then one day, she called to say that they both were going to have to leave the area, that she had applied for a principal position up in northern Michigan and received it. She tearfully expressed to me that she and her wife had just about given up on church until she discovered OUR congregation which convinced her that God was NOT dead but alive and well AFTERALL. She would always remember us and especially the open and generous heart everyone showed them when all the OTHER churches had shut their doors to them. I relate this story not to puff myself up but to say that I wasn't doing anything that JESUS HIMSELF wouldn't have done and which EVERY OTHER church in the world is EXPECTED to do, but to our shame, we STILL don't.

Certainly, every church considers itself friendly, even LOVING to an extent- a congregation which is open and available to everyone. But they may only open their door a crack, that is, just wide enough to let someone come and sit in their sanctuary where they might enjoy the music and hear the sermon and no more. Yet, the pastor will brag of how open and loving a church they all are. Well that minister is only fooling HIMSELF! The only TRUE open and loving church is where the members not only allow strangers to pass through their doorway and sit in their pew for an hour, but where the pastor and members of the congregation open the door of their HEARTS to them AS WELL so they are strangers no more; where they not only go up to them and shake their hands at the end of the service but ALSO invite them to enter the door of their OWN HOME for a meal so as to let them feel TRULY loved and welcomed.

I wish to close my sermon with some remarks made by the Canon David Kennedy--the preacher at Durham Cathedral in England--in a sermon he gave a few years back on this morning's text. After explaining that the Christ he follows is not the kind of gate that we wish to slam in other peoples' face, or lock and bolt it as if he were some kind of personal possession, he then goes on to describe the kind of Christ he DOES desire to obey:

THIS is the Jesus I seek to follow: the one who is the gate, the door; the Christ of invitation. Not a grudging, exclusive discriminating, night-club bouncer sort of Jesus, but a Jesus of welcome, hospitality and encounter. And because he is the gate and the door, this is the kind of Church I wish to serve. Not a Church that keeps its doors tightly shut in a 'keep out of here' mentality, a narrow, sectarian, head in the sand church, where only members of the club can enter. That would make the Church little more than thieves and robbers. Not a Church so fearful of what is out there that it only opens the door a little, or peers out through safety chains, or worries about the draught or whether it is letting the heat out...Not a Church that claims to offer fullness of life

but is in reality neurotic, miserable and sad, that diminishes people and weighs them down. But a Church that shouts welcome, and speaks positively and enthusiastically about the difference faith makes. That knows how to live because it knows how to forgive and lift burdens, and restore dignity, and so enables women and men to know that in Christ they are forgiven, loved and free. A Church that is a home, and through which God's beauty is glimpsed. In short, a Church whose doors are open, because the door itself and the one who stands at the door is the risen Christ, in whom is fullness of life. But a fullness of life that could only come because he first laid down his life, the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep.

Amen and amen...

A Liturgy to Dedicate Our New Church Doors

Leader: Let the doors be opened! Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep ... Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” (John 10:7-9)

The doors are opened. Pastor Dave marks the threshold of the doors with the sign of the cross, and says:

Our help is in the Name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. Let us pray:

People: Ever-living God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, watchful and caring, our source and our end: All that we are and all that we have is yours. Accept us now, as we dedicate these doors through which we enter to praise your Name, to ask your forgiveness, to know your healing power, to hear your Word, and to be nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son. Be present always to guide, to illuminate and to bless your people as we gather in this place. Help us also as we exit over this threshold — once nourished and strengthened by your Word and your Presence — to go out, confident in the work of your Mission in the world which you love.

We confess our fear associated with this threshold: For those who come fearful for the first time through these doors into an unknown place, help them cross this threshold trusting that they will be met by the gracious and unconditional welcome of your people; and, whether we go out into the world fearful for the work set before us, help us trust always in the forgiveness and courage you give us through the power of your Holy Spirit in our hearts. In Christ's name we pray, amen.

Leader: Peace be to this house, and to all who enter and exit here: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.