

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
Sermon on John 10:1-10

THE IMPORTANT DOOR

What is the most important part of the church? The sanctuary? The education building? I know that some you might even be tempted to say that it's the kitchen!

But, according to a distinguished church architect, the most important part of the church is the main entrance, the front door to the church. He said that the door prepares the way for what comes next.

It made me think about the doors to our church. They're warped from years of bad weather! Hopefully that's not symbolic of anything inside.

It is a fact though that the right door can have a great impact and be of symbolic importance to any edifice. Did you ever notice how that the model home often has a very fancy stained glass door? That door makes make the whole house seem more upscale. As they say, it makes a statement.

When I was growing up, the biggest doors I ever encountered were at the local bank. Those massive doors were meant to proclaim, "This place is like a fortress. It is a secure place to put your money."

But, today all that has changed. Now the doors to the bank are glass. The bank is light and airy. And one of the banks that I frequent even has the tellers that do their business out from behind the secure counters of my youth. They call you by your first name as they serve you in a more personal way behind a table.

I guess they are attempting to make the bank seem more accessible and user friendly. It all begins with a different kind of door.

I AM THE DOOR

Today's lesson from Scripture is also about a door. In that Scripture Jesus says, "I am the door." Jesus is the door, the gateway that leads to the kingdom of God. The only way to God is through Jesus Christ.

At its heart, this passage is a basic warning for the church. Those who proclaim a way to God other than the way provided by Jesus are dangerous to the flock.

Those who try to approach the sheep of the fold from some other angle, some other way than the door of Christ are up to no good. It is logical to assume that they are sheep rustlers just as it would be logical to assume that someone who breaks into your house through a window at night is a thief.

LACK OF UNDERSTANDING

According to our Scripture, the disciples didn't understand all that Jesus was trying to tell them. We sometimes have the same problem. We take things too literally and forget that the Word of God as revealed in Jesus is always about more than we know.

One of the questions that we are asked when we become officers in the Presbyterian Church is: "Will you serve the people with energy, intelligence and imagination?" I think that we often fail when it comes to that last characteristic, "imagination". We seem to lack the imagination that is necessary in order to really understand the message of Jesus as revealed in Scripture. We get bogged down with our own agenda, our own way of viewing the world.

AUGUSTINE AND THE BIBLE

Long ago Augustine, a bright young man with a superior classical education confessed to his Bishop that he had tried to read the Bible, but frankly, he was not impressed. He said that the Bible was crudely written and poorly edited.

His bishop replied, "You young fool. You can't get it because when you read in the Bible about 'fish' you think 'fish'. When you read 'bread' you think 'bread'." The bishop then explained to Augustine that there is a spiritual depth to Scripture. There are levels of meaning beyond the surface of things.

Years later after struggling to enter this strange new world of the Bible, Augustine was sitting under a tree in a garden. He heard a child singing,

"Take up and read. Take up and read."

Was it really a child singing or was it an angel? He couldn't tell, but he obeyed the voice. He took up the Bible, opened it to an obscure passage in the book of Romans, and his life was changed forever. That's why now he is known as "St." Augustine.

Actually, that's why many of us are "saints." No, we haven't had three miracles attributed to us nor have we performed some heroic act. We have simply heard the call of God to follow Jesus. We have come to understand that Jesus is the door to heaven. Jesus is the gate that leads to the kingdom of God, and we have entered into that kingdom through him.

LUTHERAN DOORS

The doors to the Lutheran Church have always fascinated me. Quite often they were red, symbolizing I assume the blood of Christ that is sacrificed for our sins. Perhaps those red doors also refer to the Passover, in which the people of God were saved from the angel of death by having the blood of the lamb spread on their doorposts.

Regardless, those red doors are a powerful symbol of a basic truth that has always been emphasized in the Protestant Church. This is the way that we get to be a saint. This is the way that we get into the church.

We don't come into God's kingdom through our own righteousness. We come through the blood of the Lamb of God who takes away our sins.

BAPTISMAL FONT

In the same way, the placement of the baptismal font in the church used to be symbolic of how we entered God's kingdom. In traditional church architecture you don't find the baptismal font at the front of the sanctuary, as we have ours. Instead, the font would be located at the rear of the sanctuary, near the door.

Having baptisms performed near the front door was a symbolic way to proclaim what the sacrament was all about. We don't come to God under our own power. God comes to us. God swings open the door to the church through the blood of Christ and the baptism of His Spirit.

Baptism is symbolic of what God does for us in Christ before we were even born.

That's why we baptize infants in the Presbyterian Church. It is a symbol of the fact that we don't enter the church on the basis of what we have done. Instead we enter the church on the basis of what Christ did for us over 2,000 years ago on the cross of Calvary. He is the door, his gracious forgiveness and not our response of faith.

GOD'S PROMISE

And that, by the way, is why we don't "rebaptize" people. Sometimes a person will come to me and say, "I need to be baptized again." When I ask why they feel this need for another baptism they usually respond, "I was an infant (or a child) when I was baptized. I didn't understand what it meant."

Or they may say, "I was just baptized to become a part of a particular church for social reasons. I really didn't know what it meant. Those first baptisms didn't count."

And I respond, "Baptism was not about what you believed. It was about what God promised. Baptism was about the grace of God in Jesus Christ. God in Christ swung the door of salvation wide open to the world. God in Christ swung the door of salvation wide open to you.

Your baptism was a sign of that promise, that open door. It was God's work.

Now that you have come to faith, you are walking through that open door for the first time. The promise of faith has become a reality in your life. The work that God began in Christ Jesus has now come to fruition.

To baptize you again would be to suggest that baptism is a work that we do, a way of suggesting that we can open or close the door to heaven. To baptize you again would be to suggest that God was not in your life until this moment.

And that is simply not true. All our lives are lived in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. The question is this: When will we recognize that grace and respond in faith?

SALVATION YESTERDAY AND TODAY

I like that old story of a professor at a seminary who was asked by an enthusiastic evangelical, "Are you saved?" And the professor answered, "Yes, I am saved." But, the evangelical was not convinced so he asked with a bit of suspicion in his voice, "Well, exactly when were you saved?" The professor replied, "I was saved 2,000 years ago on the cross of Calvary."

The professor had a point, and so did the evangelical. The door to the kingdom of God was thrown wide open to the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus long ago. The grace of God in Jesus Christ is the genesis of our faith. He is the door to God's kingdom through which all must come.

But, if we believe that, then there also must come a specific time in our life when we take that good news personally. There must come a time in our life when we accept that grace and out of gratitude, pattern our lives after the example of Jesus.

Living in the way of Christ gives our baptism meaning. It doesn't make any difference if we were baptized as an infant and brought up in the church or if we were baptized as an adult after a personal profession of faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord.

The important point is to recognize the fact that Jesus is still the door to the church, the way of Christ defines who we are and what we are to do. We are the sheep of his fold, and it is our job to hear his voice and obey his command.

LISTENING TO OTHER VOICES

But, there's a problem. Many of us want to be the keepers of the gate instead of being the sheep of his fold. Instead of hearing the voice of Christ and following him, we want to listen to our own voice and call it the voice of Christ.

When I was in seminary, there was a man who came to speak from a seminary on the West Coast. He who was an expert in church growth and was much in demand as a speaker. His primary principle was something he called the "homogeneous unit principle."

Simply stated the principle was this, "Churches grow more rapidly if the members of a congregation are not diverse in religious and ethnic background." He was just stating out loud what many of us have known for years. "Birds of a feather flock together."

But, the question is this, "Should we practice this principle simply because it works? Should we sacrifice the identity of the church on the altar of success?"

I say no. The most important question in the church is not "Are we being successful?" The most important question in the church is "Are we being faithful? Are we listening to the voice of Jesus? Is Jesus the key to what we believe and do?"

GRACE FOR ALL PEOPLE

And the key teaching of the gospel is that the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is all about salvation by grace through faith for all people. The kingdom of God in Jesus Christ is about bringing the good news to the whole world and not just our little corner of the world.

Was it Martin Luther King who said that the Sunday morning worship hour is the most "segregated hour of the week"? That's still true.

Our churches are segregated not only by race but also by many other factors like social class, education and political leanings. Instead of listening for the word of Christ, instead of recognizing him as the door, we proclaim our own version of the gospel. Instead of being united in our faith we are divided by our doctrine.

Why are we still divided when the gospel so clearly calls for unity?

ITCHING EARS

I would suggest that we have the same problem that the apostle Paul spoke about in his second letter to Timothy. He wrote, "the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ... "

Is that not a description of what we see so often today? In our age stubbornness masquerades as strong faith, bigotry masquerades as purity and self-interest masquerades as pastoral care. And the American dream of success even masquerades as the gospel itself.

David Read once wrote that "Bad religion is worse than no religion at all." Indeed, that is true, and sad to say, much of our religion is bad. It is bad because it does not meet the basic test of relying upon Jesus alone as the door to faith

Today we must once again remember the words of Jesus. The abundant life is not found in listening to those who give us a fake gospel, a word that we want to hear instead of a word we need to hear. The abundant life is found by listening to Jesus and following where he leads.

Jesus is still the door to our faith. He is the only way to enter God's kingdom. He alone must instruct us in what is the way, the truth and the life.

STRUGGLING TO HEAR JESUS TODAY

Don't think that because we have been attending church all our life that we automatically know what that means. We don't. Like those first disciples, we still have a hard time understanding and following the way

of Jesus. Our vision is still clouded by self-interest and fear. And it's only as we admit our blindness that we are able to see.

A preacher told about a discussion with a group of people in the church. It was a debate actually about the "war on terror". Most of the people in the room thought that the invasion of Iraq was necessary, justifiable and right.

They had many reasons why they thought this was true. The terrorists had committed a great wrong against us. We have the right to defend ourselves and so on.

There were a few people who strongly held a different view. They thought the war would not be effective, that there were other more effective means of neutralizing the terrorists. They worried that we would end up doing more harm than good.

Then someone in the room asked, "What would Jesus do? We're Christians. That means that all of these good reasons either for or against the war are beside the point. Is there anything that Jesus teaches that can help us decide the issue?"

The preacher thought that this woman had it about right. He said, "As Christians debate these issues, we ought not necessarily be swayed by what is practical or what the majority believes. We believe that Jesus is the door. We believe that there is no way to get to God except through this door named Jesus."

What would Jesus do, and what would Jesus have us do?

And so we must bring our questions to Jesus. More than that, we must bring our lives to Jesus. We must lean upon God as revealed in Jesus and not upon our own understanding.

Jesus is the door. It is open for us all. Let us enter and glorify God forever.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN