

David C. Myers  
May 15, 2011

## ***“The Door”***

John 10:1 – 10

Text: “I am the door; if any one enters by Me, that one will be saved and will go in and go out and find pasture.” . . . John 10:9 (KJV)

It was in 1973 that I first met the Rev. Dr. Thomas Dipko, then pastor of the Christ Church United in Lowell. He would later move on and eventually become the President of the of the United Church of Christ denomination. As our friendship grew he told me about a sermon he preached when that church was raising funds for its renovation. The title of the sermon was “The Sermon We Preach Twenty-four Hours a Day”. He was talking about the Church Building and what it says to the community about the people who worship there. One of the quotes he included was, “The most important part of a church is the front door.” He took that from the architect for their renovations.

The front door is the first thing that newcomers encounter about a church. A banker once gave me a brief history on the architecture of banks. In the early days of the last century he said banks were built to look like impregnable fortresses. Their front doors tended to be thick, impenetrable, solid, secure, and all the other things that people wanted to believe about a bank. You put your money in here, was the promise, and we will make sure that nobody can get to it but you.

In the mid-20th century, banks became more “user friendly.” They attempted to attract customers by putting a warm and friendly face on banking. Gone were the big, thick, impenetrable doors and glass doors were installed. Now you could look into the bank, you could see activity going on in there. You felt more welcome. The bank became accessible.

A door should be fit, not only to the size of the opening into the building, but also to the life that goes on within the building. For example, perhaps some of you remember the gangster movies that depicted the speakeasies of the roaring twenties? Someone would come up to the door and give the appointed secret knock. A little slide window would open in the door and a voice from the inside would say, “What’s the password?” If the right password were given, something like “Joe sent me,” then the door would open and the entrant would be admitted to all of the illicit excitement that was going on inside.

Another example is the door into the principal’s office, particularly in the elementary school that I attended. On that door, the half window (frosted glass, by the way) of the door had printed, in large gold letters, “PRINCIPAL.” But once inside you could see this ancient, austere man, sitting behind a desk, just waiting to deal out punishment: floggings, fines, and making calls to your parents. There was no way to go through that door without your knees shaking and your hands trembling!

What do our church doors say about our church? Our doors from the parking lot and Connecticut Avenue entrance to the education wing are mostly glass; whereas our doors to our worship centers (the Sanctuary and Chapel) are solid wood with either small windows or crinkled glass windows. What do those doors say about our church?

What is the chief function of the door? Is it a means of entering, or a means of exit? Are doors built mainly for the benefit of those on the outside, or are they designed mostly to the specifications of those on the inside? Is the purpose of the door to keep people out, or to welcome invite people to come in?

There is another kind of “door” for faithful Christians. In today’s gospel – taken from the King James Version, Jesus says that He is “the door.” It is an interesting figure of speech. “I am the door.” In other translations the term is “I am the gate.”

You get this sort of thing throughout the Gospel of John. John has a highly figurative, deeply metaphorical, symbolic presentation of Jesus. It is in John’s gospel that you get images like, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Or, “I am the good shepherd.” Or, “I am the vine and you are the branches.” And now this Sunday, “I am the door,” or, “I am the gate.”

Our gospel lesson begins with Jesus saying that he is a shepherd, a favorite designation for Jesus in the Gospel of John. He is not only the shepherd, he is the Good Shepherd. He is not only the Good Shepherd, but He is the Shepherd who is so good that he is willing even to lie down His life for the sheep.

The image of God as the shepherd of the sheep goes way back in history. “Know that the Lord is God. It is He that has made us, and we are His. We are his people, and the sheep of His pasture.” (Psalm 100) God’s care for his people is the faithful loving care of a shepherd for his sheep. That is one of the abiding images of God in the Bible

That’s the romantic part of the image. But let me tell you, if you know anything about shepherds and sheep this image is not very flattering – to either side. Sheep are in the running for the dumbest animals on earth. And yet, obviously, in the Biblical days they do have redeeming qualities. They provided wool for both clothes and tents. When slaughtered they provided food.

I don’t know about you, but I am not comfortable being compared to a sheep.

However, being a shepherd is not much better. Shepherds were a nomadic group. They had no roots – they had to constantly move the herd to wherever they could find food, or a market for the wool or meat. They worked long, hard hours, lived in tents, carried their belongings with them daily; and received very little compensation for their efforts. In short, shepherds were at the bottom of the list of the most sought after professions.

So there you have it. God is our shepherd, and we are the sheep. And at least from my point of view, there is not much redeeming about either part of the analogy.

However, the image persists throughout Biblical literature. Those who are called out by God to be His servants are to be the shepherds of Israel, which, in turn, are the sheep. According to Scripture, the Judges, Elijah, and Elisha and the anointed of God are to be God’s shepherds of His people. And David is known as the Shepherd King of Israel, God’s anointed King.

But David knew Who his shepherd was. Our well-known and much beloved Psalm 23 is one of David's Psalms, in which David acknowledges that he is a sheep and God is His shepherd. God is the shepherd of His people. But there are those who have been called out by God to act on His behalf as shepherds to God's people.

But it is one thing to be the Shepherd, and quite another to be the gate, or the "door".

Then Jesus tells today's story about the sheepfold. Perhaps like large feed lots now, or like cattle drives in the old west, individual shepherds would merge their flocks with other flocks at various times. There were large holding areas for a number of flocks, run by people who were independent of the shepherds. Several shepherds might bring their flocks to these large holding areas and leave them. This might be a nightly thing. It might be a shearing time. The shepherds would bring their flock through the gate (the door) and there was an attendant who was the gatekeeper. The gatekeeper was on duty.

Part of the benefit of using the large holding area was that the area was fenced in and there was someone on guard. The gatekeeper (or the doorkeeper) provided security for all the sheep while in the pen. When the shepherd came back for his sheep, the gatekeeper opens the gate, and the shepherd cuts out from the huge flock his own sheep.

The shepherd knows his sheep. He knows their markings, he knows their color, and he knows their shapes and their sizes. He has given them names. He has lived with them and raised them. And even more importantly his sheep know him. They know his voice, they know his smell. They are his sheep. All of this is open and done publicly. The shepherd deals with the gatekeeper. He drives them out in public. He leads them. There is no secrecy. There is no trickery. The sheep follow. They will not follow a stranger.

So, what then does it mean for Jesus to say directly to us, "I am the door" or, "I am the gate?"

Looked at one way, when Jesus says, "I am the door," he is using a rather humble image for himself. Jesus is the door that leads to God. The door is not the house, not the dwelling place, not the goal; a door is a passageway into the house, a means of getting to a destination. Thus, when Jesus says, "I am the door," it is similar to Jesus calling himself "the way." He is the way to God, the way to abundant life, the path to true freedom. Jesus is the means whereby we get to God.

This is who and what Christians are. We are people who think that, of all the possible ways that one might get to God, the best way, the surest way, and the only way to God **for Christians** is Jesus. It is this Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, and rose unexpectedly, that we have the surest way to God.

As I said, this strikes me as a rather humble image of Jesus to apply to himself. If Jesus is the door, He is not the destination, the end result, but the way to that end. And yet, as we have said before, doors are important. A door tells you a great deal about the character of the house, what goes on inside. When we look at Jesus, we believe that we have seen as much of God as we ever hope to see. Here is not only a door into the house, but a door that is part of the house, a door that tells us much about the house. That is, we cannot imagine being in the presence of God that was not in the loving, compassionate, suffering, self-sacrificial way that was the way of Jesus.

You are those who have gathered here in the house of God. How did you get here? You had to come through the door. That door is Jesus.

You grasped the handle and opened the door. Or, maybe more to the point, that door has miraculously, graciously opened to you, and you walked through the threshold and came inside.

That is why, historically (and still in most Catholic churches), there is a baptismal font in the very front of the church. Once you come through the door by its very presence you are encouraged to dip your fingers in the font and remember your baptism for it is baptism that is the door through which we get into the church. Or more to the point of the scripture, baptism is a sign of Jesus, the way that we get to God through Him, the entryway, and the front door.

This means that when Jesus said, "I am the door," when He asserts "I am the door that leads to eternal life," many of you sitting here today can say, "Amen!" In your own life, you have demonstrated the truths of this passage of scripture. Jesus has been for you the door, the way to life eternal. That's why you are here. For you, this scripture is not so much an exhortation to do something that you have not done, but a confirmation of what you have already done, something that you have found to be true in your own experience.

Jesus is the door. Amen.