

"Open and Shut Doors"
(Luke 13:22-30)

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The first thought I had when I looked at our Gospel for today was a memory of an old TV contest show, "Let's Make a Deal". Why? Because it was set around a theme of how contestants would make choices on opening the three doors on the set. The show was popular as I remember in the 60's and 70's, and even kept on into the 90's through syndication. There have even been learned essays written on how to calculate the percentages in the choices one has about opening the right doors.

So I backed into the Gospel passage this morning from that memory, and not very comfortable about doing it, because the theme of the passage is far from "Let's Make A Deal". It's another one like last Sunday about Judgment Day. Now I confess that I have never liked to preach about hellfire, brimstone, or similar versions of judgment day, as I had to do last Sunday, when Luke's Gospel had Jesus saying, "I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it was already kindled!" I commented that this is not exactly the type of reading that we would want to take to the beach with us! And this Sunday, we return to this type of passage, listening to a text about narrow doors and closed doors and the gnashing of teeth!

I can't help but remember back in 1956 when the diocesan Board of Examining Chaplains required me to prepare a sample sermon based on this text. My memory of that time is something like priests must have felt during the Grand Inquisition, when they were tortured if they didn't come up with the right answers.

The fact is, I have tried in my ministry to follow the advice that Bishop Desmond Tutu once gave to a class of seminarians. He said that every single sermon should have the love of God as its focus. I certainly say AMEN to that! I have a sense that many people come to church with an ample sense of being judged by a competitive society and by other people, but with an insufficient sense of being truly loved.

So I welcome all the opportunities to proclaim that nothing can separate us from the love of God that we have known through Christ our Lord. (Romans 8:39) I am also comforted, and have sought to comfort others, by the words of Psalm 46 we read this morning: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved, . . . though its waters rage and foam . . . for the Lord of hosts is with us."

But having said all that, what are we to make of this Gospel I have just read to you this morning? How can it be “Good News” to talk about narrow doors, closing doors, and those cast outside? What do we make of this in a church where we try to be as welcoming as possible? What sense can we make of narrow doors and shut doors while, at the same time, celebrating the breadth of God’s mercy?

I have no memory today of how I dealt with this text in my ordination exams, but — not to worry—I **did** get ordained! —despite the fact that I was probably too anxious then to satisfy my harsh examiners with theological observations about salvation, and too limited at the age of 27 to really know what it is to be forgiven by God and given opportunities to start over again. I think you’ll agree that we all have missed opportunities to anticipate and respond to people and situations as well as we should have, but isn’t it also true that we sometimes don’t connect those real-life dilemmas with what is given to us in the bible lessons appointed for the Sunday?

What is important is the appropriateness of our response. As Jesus goes from one town and village to another on his way to Jerusalem, someone asks him, “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” There’s a catch in such a question if you think about it. Jesus always recognized questions like that as the smoke screens they are. Other examples: “Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar, or not,” or the question about the hypothetical situation of the woman who had been married to seven different husbands: “in the resurrection...whose wife will the woman be?”

In every such instance, including this one, Jesus cuts right through the abstract and philosophical irrelevancy of the catch-question to the person’s real need, saying, in effect, “Forget about how many will be saved; what about you?” He goes on to illustrate this by talking about a door that will be shut and those left standing outside the door that will be lost forever. “Just make sure you’re not one of them. Believe in God’s words and act upon them.” This is not like a TV Quiz Show! You can’t change channels! —Jesus is talking about real life.

In other words, Carpe Diem - seize the day! An old Arab proverb also has significance for our text: “One cannot mount a camel that has not yet arrived; or one that has already departed.” The text says that Jesus was “teaching on the way to Jerusalem,” proclaiming by word and deed that the kingdom of God was alive in their midst, and that it was time to act on that.

When is the door shut forever? Once I happened to see a big sign in front of a tree nursery in London, Ontario, Canada that read “*THE BEST TIME TO PLANT A TREE WAS 25 YEARS AGO.*” That’s a sobering jolt of a reminder that trees do take a long time to mature. But that isn’t the whole story about that sign at the Canadian tree nursery. The complete message was “*THE BEST TIME TO PLANT A TREE WAS 25 YEARS AGO. THE SECOND BEST TIME IS TODAY.*” A tree should still be planted, in spite of squandered opportunities of 25 years ago. That’s the doctrine of the second chance. As long as the door of your life is still open, you have the opportunity to “seize the day” and walk into a new chapter of that life.

I believe that the God who acts in history, the Lord God who is defined by his loving initiatives, never shuts the door on us. All you have to do is look at the world's history and your own to realize that it is we who shut the door - by our own sins that we usually call by other names, and by our follies and bad judgments. God both loves and judges our humanity. He is the one who seeks and forgives us. But God expects and demands a response; he asks that we seize the day and make choices. When you have to make a choice and don't make it, that is in itself a choice.

And God says that we are accountable, because we are building our lives by all those choices we make. Life is the sum of those choices. It's like a jigsaw puzzle with a scene from life on one side and your picture on the other: when you complete the puzzle of the scene of your history, on the other side you are filling in the picture of the person you are presenting to God. Think about Isaiah's words about the plumb line in the first lesson this morning. "Choices are the hinges of destiny."

The opening question posed to Jesus may have been diversionary, but it is an honest one, expressing a deep contemporary anxiety about the human situation. Is the world out of control? Is this the End? Those questions are more pervasive in society than we and other seemingly-sophisticated Episcopalians sometimes think. So pay attention to Jesus' reply, because it is rooted in reality. However we describe the times in which we live, our vocation as Christians is to live lives of meaning and integrity. If we don't, Jesus says that God will look to others to do what we have failed to do.

Jesus' words give a depth and resonance to "Carpe Diem!" Seize the day! In the words of the well-remembered Scot, Thomas Carlyle, "Our main business is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand."

AMEN