

THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR

Ruel Howe had a friend with terminal cancer. Howe went to visit his friend one day, not knowing what to say. He was amazed to find the friend in control of himself. In fact, the friend told Howe: When I began to work through this experience (of dying), I made an amazing discovery. And it is this: For every exit, there is an entrance. All the way through my life I have had to give up things in order to get things. I've had exits in order to get entrances. I had to give up something in order to go to school. I had to give up something in order to take a job. I had to give up a single life in order to get married. All the way through my life, I've died a hundred deaths. I have had to die for something in order to get something new and better. For every exit, there is an entrance. And death is one more exit to that which is more.

Howe's friend died, and Howe was asked to conduct the funeral. It was a difficult experience for him. The loss of that loved one hurt, and he was overcome by grief. As he was walking down the aisle in front of the casket, he noticed a sign on the back wall, courtesy of the fire marshal, the word that summed up the experience of his friend's life and the faith that he had. That one word was EXIT. (John Claypool's sermon, *The Saga of Life: Senior Adulthood*, Broadway Baptist Ch./Ft. Worth, TX, 9/28/76)

The man's insight that for every exit, there is an entrance, came to mind this past week as I reflected on the words of our Lord when he said, I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. This autobiographical statement was followed by another one of Jesus' claim, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

Both of these I am claims I am the door I am the good shepherd tie Jesus to the Lord God, who spoke to Moses from the burning bush and said, I AM WHO I AM! In other words, Jesus is God in human flesh. Jesus also identified himself with the Shepherd-God in Psalm 23. Jesus is the divine shepherd, who provides for his flock, guides them, supports them, and is the gracious host at table for them. Furthermore, in linking these images of door and shepherd, Jesus was calling to mind the various sheepfolds that dotted the Judean hills where the sheep were lodged each night. These sheepfolds were C shaped; the sheepfolds had no fixed door or entrance because the shepherd, in reality, was the door. At night, once the sheep were safely inside the fold, the shepherd would lay down across the entrance to the fold. Nothing came in or went out without crossing over the shepherd. Thus, the shepherd gave security and protection to the sheep by placing himself in the breach of the wall. In using these images of door and shepherd, Jesus claimed to give security to and provide protection for his own flock, for those who followed him in this life and the next. With these thoughts in mind, I want to recall the idea of an exit and an entrance (which leads to something more) and Jesus' claim, I am the door; whoever enters by me will be saved. The doctrine of salvation, as found in the Old Testament, originally meant to broaden or enlarge; it is the creation of space in the community for life and conduct. We understand Israel's salvation best when we remember how God freed Israel from her captivity and forced slavery in Egypt and led her into the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. From less to so much more that is salvation. And that is precisely what Christians have experienced in and through the gospel, the good news regarding the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the door, the One who saves us from sin and death and leads us into new, abundant, and eternal life. When we follow the good shepherd, the risen Christ, who is the door for us, we pass from one existence into another, a better way of being. We pass from a self-centered life and move into a loving relationship with God, who rightfully becomes our main focus. We strive to move away from a sinful life in order to walk in newness of life. We exit from a life that is gripped by the fear of death, and we enter into eternal life, which is filled with hope for what lies beyond death (and before death, for that matter!) for we believe the risen Christ has conquered death, and his victory is our victory. When we come to Christ, we pass out of an emphasis on rugged individualism and we enter into covenant, not only with Christ but also with

the community of faith, the whole body of Christ. Furthermore, we move from an inward preoccupation with ourselves to an outward concentration on serving and caring for others just like the good shepherd himself! When we go through the open door that is none other than Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior, we leave behind that, which, at first glance, appears to be nothing but a dead-end, and we enter in to a new perspective, which is filled with new possibilities and hope. After all, if God could take Jesus crucifixion, and transform it into his resurrection thereby offering us the forgiveness of our sins and new life on both sides of death - then, believe me when I say that with God all things are possible! In the process of leaving behind the old life and entering into the new and evolving life that Christ offers us, we too become an open door community that receives and welcomes all kinds of people again, just like Jesus did! It should be noted that Jesus uttered these words, I am the door, right after the man, who had been born blind, was kicked out of the synagogue by the religious authorities. Jesus came to the man, and, whereas before Jesus opened the man's blind eyes, this time Jesus opened his eyes to see, by faith, that Jesus was the Messiah; and Jesus offered him a growing faith in God and an ever-expanding fellowship with the disciples. We too are called to welcome one another and all others into the fellowship of the Church. We need to remember that Jesus is the door because, at times, we may be tempted to act as though we are in charge of who may enter and who may not, who's in and who is out. Jesus alone is the gate or door. As his sheep, our job is not to question or usurp his decisions but to rejoice in our own inclusion into the fold and then welcome others who have heard and followed the good shepherd's voice. Together, we are called to practice a fellowship of Christian grace. As God has been gracious to us, we are to be gracious to each other. Let us appreciate God's gift of our fellowship in Christ Jesus, and let us affirm one another as we live out our salvation. When we love as we are loved, when we act accordingly in grateful response to Jesus death and resurrection for our sakes then we will enhance and expand the joy of our communion with each other. Let us live life on purpose! After all, we have died to sin and have been raised to new life!

Let me close with this true story. Norman Vincent Peale was sharing a crowded taxi on the way to preaching a sermon at a large conference. The taxi driver was complaining about all his problems and troubles. He was convinced that the whole world was filled with crooks, and everything and everybody was rapidly going to Hades. Tell em that at your rally, reverend, the cab driver said. Beside Dr. Peale there was a heavy-set, jolly lady with a big, happy face. She leaned over to Dr. Peale and said, Don't do it. We all know that. Tell them instead about Jesus and how he came to give us all Gods' gift of a resurrected life. Then the lady reached over the seat and tapped the taxi driver on the shoulder and said to him, Young man, what you need is to get resurrected! That is our need as well. We all need to get resurrected, and then, we need to get busy sharing the resurrected life with one another and all others. In the very next chapter of John's gospel - after Jesus says, I am the door I am the good shepherd, - Jesus tells Mary, I am the resurrection and the life, and then he backs up that claim by raising Lazarus from death to life. If we are serious about our salvation, Jesus will raise us up and help us to experience new life, deeper peace, greater joy, and so much more. Let us go through the open door that is Christ Jesus and enter into the abundant life that he so desires to give us all. Let us get good and resurrected for the well being of the church and to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Randall C. Stevens First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA April 13, 2008)