

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**The Reverend Mark S. Merrill**

April 13, 2008

Windows and Doors of Faith

John 10:1-10

Russell Anderson has written:

Christians might be compared to windows and doors. A little boy was transfixed by the stained glass windows in a magnificent church. As the sun cast its illuminating glow, he asked: 'Mom, who are those people that the light shines through?' Her reply, 'They are the saints, my son.' The people of God are those whom the light of the divine shines through.

Father Pat has written:

Today, as we celebrate Good Shepherd Sunday, we have a chance to consider the 'shepherds' in our lives and also those who consider us their 'shepherd – those through whom the light of God shines.'

In the gospel reading Jesus talks about the sheepfold and the gate, the shepherd, the sheep following the shepherd because they know his voice, and that he (Jesus) is the gate for the sheep. I would assume that sheep herding practices of Palestine were not something you studied when you were in school. Some information about these should be helpful in helping us understand that to which Jesus is referring. The basic information comes from a book by Leslie D. Weatherhead.

The sheepfold out in the valley consists of 4 high rough walls with thorns fixed on top to try to keep out thieves and robbers. In one of the walls is a small open space, the doorway, just a little wider than a shepherd's body. The shepherd calls each sheep by name. Each sheep comes to him and he checks the sheep over before letting it move into the fold. After all the sheep are in, he builds a fire just outside the doorway, with himself on the inside near the sheep. After preparing and eating his dinner, the shepherd lies down in the doorway and goes to sleep there. So between the sheep and any wild animal that might try to get in to kill the sheep are the fire and the body of the shepherd. The good, true shepherd literally was putting his life on the line for his flock. Characteristics of this shepherd were constant vigilance, fearless courage, and patient love for his flock.

In the towns of Palestine, the sheepfold was a courtyard where the sheep stayed at night. A single door in the courtyard wall was guarded by a gatekeeper who let in the sheep and the true shepherds. Different herds of sheep could be in one sheepfold, yet be separated rather easily. In the morning when it was time for the flocks to leave, one shepherd would go a way from the fold and call out to his sheep. They would run to him because they knew his voice. They would not respond to the voices of any of the other shepherds because it was only the call of their own shepherd that they recognized.

We remember that Jesus said, “He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him....” The shepherd does not merely point out the way for the sheep, he shows them the way, he always go ahead of them. William Barclay has written, that “the word shepherd should paint a picture to us of the unceasing vigilance and patient love of God...” As the sheep would go through a door, a gate, to get in and out of the sheepfold, listening only to the voice of their shepherd, throughout all our lives we are continually going in and out of all kinds of doors, opening some doors and closing others. We often stand on the threshold of one of life’s new doors. Too often the decision to go through or not go through a door has to be made in a split-second. We have to make the choice right then. We hope that our years of living and the example of others, good and true shepherds in our lives, will help us make the right choice.

These moments require that we have a secure center from which to move out into all of life’s many different situations, and that we remember the voice of God in the words of Jesus, “I am the door.” Arthur Fay Suelztz reminds us that:

The Lord says to me, I am that kind of door. I can provide you the safety you long for at the center of your life. Enter and find the poise you need to live in this dangerous world. Trust me, and you’ll discover safety in the darkness, and guidance in the light. I will lead your going out and your coming in.

When we live as one of Christ’s people, we too become doors through which others come to know life as one of Christ’s. Are we open doors for all who ask entrance? Or are we shut, keeping others out of the household of God?

The Rev. Suelztz tells the following two stories:

During a census, a census taker asked a woman how many children she had. She began by saying, ‘Let’s see, there are Sally, Jimmy, Bob....’ And the census taker said, ‘No, no, don’t give me the names, just give me the numbers’ ‘But,’ the woman countered, ‘they don’t have numbers. They have names!’ Statistics have a place in church rolls and in government, but not in the heart of God. I am not a number, nor are you; each of us has a name.

And,

As Indian churchman D.T. Niles traveled in northern India, he noticed a young shepherd boy keeping a huge flock. He stopped and asked, ‘How many sheep do you have? The boy answered, ‘I don’t know. I can’t count.’ Niles asked him, ‘How do you know if some of the sheep haven’t wandered off when you get to the place where you’re going to camp at night?’ To his astonishment the boy answered, ‘I don’t know how many wander off, but I know which ones. I can’t count, but each sheep has a name, and I know their names.’

We have to ask ourselves, “In our pluralistic society, with so many voices competing for our attention, do we lose the voice of the Good Shepherd and of the others who have been shepherds for us, going astray now and then, falling into danger, perhaps following a voice that sounds strong, smart and seductive, but different? Will we follow it down a path that might lead us away from Christ? Whose voice do we follow and with what voice do we speak? What doors do we enter? What doors do we lead others to enter?

Again, from the pen of the Rev. Suelz:

God is not a theologian, he's our Father, and he's not as interested in correct ideas as he is in us. He says, Follow me. I will lead you out into life. I will help you find a faith so profound that it will begin to affect the life of the community in which you live.

As he used the figure of the door, Jesus described his protective concern for those who are his. As the gate, the door, Jesus opens up the way for people to God, to freedom, joy and liberty. He is the entrance in to the Kingdom of God, in to the family of faith. He proclaimed religion as a way of life, a relationship with God, all-loving and purposeful. He showed us what God meant human life to be like. He said, "I am the way. Try my way of life. Come with me." Doing this we will be able to live in the true sense of the word, experiencing life really worth living. We will be windows and doors to faith for others, as people have been windows and doors of faith for us in our lives.