

THE OPEN DOOR CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST

April 17, 2005 – Grace Church, Haddonfield

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

One of the things I like to do when I finish other towns or cities is to look for the local Episcopal Church. I want to go in, pray, look around and check out the track rack! Do you know what I find? The doors are locked! I will try other doors, and sometimes I can get in, but most often I can't. It's the same thing with the other churches in the town. It's not very heartening to find the churches locked. The only ones I usually find open are the African American churches!

This is a curious experience. It must be a commentary on our times ... and us. It seems that we find things more important than people. We want to protect our churches and keep the inside nice and neat. But what is more important than keeping God's house open for people? What will it take to open the doors of the church? Our lives? Our faith?

The Gospel of John tells us today that Jesus is the "gate." John uses seven powerful images to describe Jesus. Here, he talks about Jesus being the door. The evangelist wants us to know that Jesus is the way to God, new life and more. His image of the gate, or door for us, would have resonated with the audience. It would help us to understand what this imaged meant then and try to connect it to our understanding today.

In Jesus' time there were shepherds who cared for herds of sheep. They wandered the countryside looking for grazing areas. At night, the shepherd had to find protection and shelter. The shepherd would bring the sheep into a pen, or closed in area. It would have high walls or be a rocky canyon. Briars or thorns would be on top of the fence or rocks to ward off predators.

The only opening to the "sheepfold" would be a two feet wide "door." It would not be wooden or made of material. This would be where the shepherd ushers the sheep inside. The shepherd would become the door. From here the shepherd could fight off threats and keep the sheep from threats. The guardian would provide safety, security, care and attention to the flock.

John is trying to tell us that Jesus is the door, the way, for the faithful. We can gain access to God through him. What is even more astounding is that Jesus KNOWS US EACH BY NAME! The Christ is familiar with us, recognizes us and brings us together as the community of God! The sheep respond to Jesus because they RECOGNIZE HIS VOICE! How wonderful and reassuring! We are knowing and known! We are part of Jesus.

What kind of door are we? The most important part of a Church is its front door. It's the way we enter into the community and house of God. It says a lot about us to the rest of the world. I like the fact that the outer doors here are open. We have the glass door so people can look in. But what about coming in? We subtly say that there are only certain times that you can come in ... that we only welcome people at certain times.

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In the last parish I served, the doors of the Church were open every day from 9-5. Everyday! What are we afraid of? Who do we deny access to God by closing and locking our doors? We are more concerned with safety and security, protecting our things, and then serving God. It feels as if the Church Insurance Company is dictating how we will do ministry. Where do we go to pray when we are in need?

We have to open the doors and ourselves. I usually unlock the doors on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. I opened the Church on September 11th ... lots of people came in to pray. I put a sign out on the front lawn to let people know we were open. Just this past week, someone came to pray. They knew to ask in the office for the Church to be unlocked. They wanted comfort. They wanted access to God. We have to remember whom we follow and serve. Jesus didn't turn anyone away ... why do we?

There is a story about a Church in San Francisco, St. Anthony's (Peter Marty, Christian Century, Aril, 1996). They served a hot meal to who every wanted it everyday. One day a young mechanic, just released from prison came. He entered in the Church and noticed a sign over the door. It read, "Caritate Dei." He looked around for the meal.

The young man sat down at a table. A woman was busy cleaning a table next to him. He asked, "When do we get down on our knees and do chores?" "You don't," answered the woman. "When do we get the sermon then?" he asked. "There's no sermon," she said. "Well, when do we get the lecture?" "There's no lecture," she replied. "What's the gimmick?" asked the puzzled young man. The woman pointed to the sign over the door. "What does it say?" he asked. "It says," she said with a smile, "Out of love for God."

What's the inscription over the door of our Church and life? I'd like to see a sign over our doors that says, "Go in PEACE to LOVE and SERVE the Lord." If our inscription has to do with genuine love for God, we can't go wrong! Jesus is the door. What shall we put over our door?

We must become people of the open door. Jesus calls us to learn how to live out of love and joy ... instead of through fear and insecurity. Jesus is the door, the way. He is our model and inspiration. It is our call to open the way for others and ourselves. Many of the things we do now are part of the way: St. Paul's; Kids' Alley; St. Anne's; the Newcomers' brunch; and more. There are other things we can do: homeless shelters; AIDS ministry; Oasis; a companion relationship with another parish; El Salvador; and more.

All it takes in unlocking the door of fear and doubt. All it takes is opening us to God, love and faith. We also are encouraged to know people by name and to listen for the voice of Jesus. When we can do this, we will recognize the Christ's presence with us. It promises to be an exciting and rewarding journey! Are we ready to open the door?