

**In the Name of God,  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**

**Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-19**

Sunday, 15 May 2011

Preached at Grace Church, Elmira

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

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Misunderstandings can happen in parish ministry all the time. Take, for instance, the Sunday morning that the clergyman noticed little Billy staring up at the plaque that hung in the narthex. It was covered with names and small American flags were mounted on both sides of it.

The seven-year-old kept staring at the plaque for some time. Finally, the priest walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, “*Good morning, Billy.*”

“*Good morning,*” replied the young man — still gazing at the plaque. “*Father, what is this?*” the boy blurted out. “*Well, son,*” intoned the rector, “*it’s a memorial to all the men and women who died while they were in the service.*” Soberly, they both stood together staring at the plaque. Little Billy, hardly above a whisper, then asked the preacher, “*Which service was it, the 8 o’clock or the 10:15?*”



In today’s Gospel reading, the opportunity for misunderstanding presents itself as well. Images of “sheepfolds” and “shepherds” and “sheep” and “gatekeepers” and “strangers” and a “thief” and a “bandit” fell from the mouth of Jesus, and not even the disciples got it (10:6). So Jesus tried again — a bit more plainly this time. “*I am the gate for the sheep . . . I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture*” (vv 7-9).



In the Gospels, Jesus “I Am-ed” many other realities of life to get His point across — the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the Vine, and the Way, to name but a few. These were but mere illustrations of not only His being, but also of His mission which He came to give to us. Today we hear yet another one of these metaphors, “I am the Gate.” For those of us who might be figuratively challenged, maybe a bit more explaining might be in order.

The ancient Hebrews thought of the firmament above — that is the original “sky dome” — as being the great beyond which lay God’s realm, or heaven. In such a view, it would have been natural for them to think of a “doorway” leading into this realm of heaven from the earthly sphere of living. So after the experience at Bethel, Jacob said, “*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven*” (Gen 28:17). And the Psalmist says of God, “*Yet he commanded the skies above, and he opened the doors of heaven; he rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven*” (78:23-24).

Given this background, Jesus, as “the gate,” embodies the revelation of heaven. He is the “portal” of the Holy breaking into the world. And through this “portal” of Jesus, by way of an intimate relationship with Him and His revelation, there comes the “manna” of God’s presence and power. Jesus is the “entryway” into the realm of the Spirit of God. Others who seek to find this “door” might have to guess or grope, and then find only a partial way in. But those who come to Jesus as “the gateway” find the sure, secure way to the ultimate reality of God.

A number of years ago I read a book entitled *Heaven: The Heart’s Deepest Longing*, by Peter Kreeft (Ignatius Press, 1989). In the book, the author held that there are six basic “thirsts” that we human beings have, which fall under three levels. At the ***Bodily Level***, we thirst for **pleasures** and **sensory experience**. In our basic creatureliness, we find the fulfillment of these thirsts through the world about us — and it is “meet and right” that we should do so for that is what God created the world to give to us.



world.

On yet another level — the ***Soul Level*** — we thirst for the **experience of happiness** and **knowledge**. On emotional and intellectual levels we thirst for fulfillment. We bond, we read, we think, we create, and we calculate all out of our thirst for intimacy and productivity. Love and work, said Freud, were the key components of a healthy life. The answer, therefore, to the Soul Level comes from this dimension — from Self discernment and relationship and differentiation — from one another in significant relationship, from gaining knowledge AND from applying both the relationships and knowledge in positive ways to the way we live in the

The third level is the ***Spirit Level***. Here, the two great thirsts are for the **experiences of joy** and **wisdom**, both of which can only be answered in God. The trouble, of course, is that we try to satisfy these thirsts from “the world” — just where we have found gratification for our other desires! Herein lies the crux of the challenge we so often face. We were created in our spirits for ecstasy — for communion with God — and the joy which that communion brings. We seek to fill the “God void” in us from the realm of ***bios*** (that is, the natural life ) when only ***zoe*** (that is, the life of Spirit) will actually do. The word “ecstasy” we might want to remind ourselves is derived from the Greek *ek-stasis*, which means “*a standing outside of self.*”

When Jesus proclaims to the disciples that He is “the Gate,” He is not telling them that He has hinges on His ribs and that He is fashioned out of hard wood to make for a uniquely formidable door. Nor is He saying that He is somehow the entryway into an animal habitat surrounded by high stone walls with brambles around the perimeter for extra protection. He is telling them, however, that *He is the sure-fire way to answer the thirsts of the Spirit Level of life.*

*He is the dependable, reliable way to God as God really is. Come to this “gate” and you will enter heaven — also knows as the Abundant Life.*

In his poem, *Look Homeward Angel*, Thomas Wolfe searches the landscape for an “unfound door” to answer the primal riddle of our separation and alienation. He scribes: *“Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb, we did not know our mother’s face. From the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth.*

*Which of us has known his brother? Which of us has looked into his father’s heart? Which of us has not remained forever prison-pent? Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone . . . Lost! Remembering speechlessly we seek the great forgotten language, the lost lane-end into heaven . . . and unfound door. Where? When?”*



The Gospel message is that Jesus is the “Unfound Door” that we all seek. The doorway to the heart’s deepest desire — ***to know and be known by God***. And the question before us each day is “Do we want to walk through the Door?” Do we want to step through the Gateway of Jesus into the Realm of Light? Or do we want to be a huddled mass of scurrying sheep, uneasy and bleating — to be nothing but mutton for the world? The decision, my friends, is ours to make.