Sunday, September 2, 1990
DOORS TO OPEN AND DOORS TO CLOSE
Matthew 7:13-14; Revelation 3:20-4:1

"Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."
Matthew 7:13-14

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. To those who conquer, I will grant them to sit on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with God on God's throne. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. After this, I looked and lo, in heaven an open door."
Revelation 3:20 — 4:1

Sermons have different kinds of beginning points in the mind of the preacher. Many, but not all, of the sermons I write come directly from a passage or story in the Bible. I study the Biblical story, consult the commentaries, consider the overall context of the passage — that is, what comes before it and after it — and try as best as I can to determine what the story had to say to the people of the time in which it was first heard. Then, I do my best to apply it to our situation today. All through the process, I am trying to hear what God is saying to us today through the text from the Bible.

Then there are sermons that begin with a problem facing us as human beings. For example, how do we, as people attempting to follow Jesus, deal with fear, death, or tragedy? How do we deal with sin and evil? Are we always to forgive those who hurt us? What does the good news of the Christian faith have to say to those of us who are suffering in one way or another? With the help of the Bible, I try to discover what God is saying to us in such situations.

Sometimes a sermon idea comes to me as I am reading a book, a newspaper story, a column, or an essay.

Still, other sermons have their beginning in the mind of the preacher because of some question or comment someone has made to me, or because something strikes the preacher as being an especially appropriate metaphor for understanding and guiding our lives as people who want to follow the way of Jesus.

Thus, some months ago, a faithful member of the congregation said to me, "Sometime I'd like you to do a sermon on 'doors.'" She went on to say, "For years I've been fascinated by doors." I began to think about the many different kinds of doors there are in our world — open doors, closed doors, secret doors, closet doors, hidden doors, trap doors, front doors, back doors, half-doors, screen doors, automatic doors, revolving doors, swinging doors, sliding doors, and double doors. I like double doors, but I'm always puzzled when only one of them will open, and the other is locked. There's a little poem titled, "The Double Door Effect."

Double doors are justified
Because they're comfortable wide,
Therefore you only half undo 'em
And nothing can get through 'em.

There's also the mystery of what is behind a closed door. One summer, I worked as a door-to-door salesman selling aluminum cookware. I would knock on a door and wonder who would answer it and what that person's response would be. Some of you will remember a television program, which I believe is still on the air—"LET'S MAKE A DEAL," and the contestant at one point has to choose one of three identical-looking doors to be opened, but behind each door, there are different kinds of rewards or prizes. It's difficult to choose many times which door to open.

Some doors and doorways are inviting, and others are forbidding. The most "forbidding" doors that I have ever entered are those that lead into a jail or prison as I have gone there to visit someone. Whenever I hear those large steel barred doors bang shut, I shudder. I don't like having those doors closed behind me, especially since someone else is in control of opening them again.

On the other hand, think of the inviting main front doors of this church, which have above them the words of Jesus, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." We are continually reminded that we, as a congregation, are to practice an "open door" policy, especially to those who are weary and worn down with life.

Doors are fascinating. You never know what you might find on the other side of a closed door. A few years ago, my wife and I were in Dublin, Ireland, which is known as the city of doors. The people there are proud of the front doors of wherever they might live. So they are brightly painted and decorated. The rest of the house or apartment might be in bad repair, but never the door.

I tucked the idea of a sermon on doors away into the sermon file, which is always an active one in my mind, and from time to time, would think about it. How is life like a door? I know some people, for example, for whom life is like a revolving door. They go from one job to another, one marriage to another, one addiction, then treatment, then back to addiction. They go round and round, in and out, and never seem to get anywhere.

The more I thought about doors, the more I thought about the question: what are some of the ways in which the living out of our Christian faith can be compared to a door? Then, as I continued to read the Bible, I kept finding myself coming across passages that used doors or gates as metaphors, and I discovered there are many. Two such passages were read earlier. In one, Jesus said:

"Enter by the narrow gate, (or door), for the gate is wide, and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few."

This second passage from the Bible is one of my favorites. It uses a door as a metaphor and is in the book of Revelation. The author, in his vision, sees Jesus, and he is saying, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." What an invitation! Jesus, the love of God in the flesh, is continually knocking on our door and asking to be invited into our lives.

I remember, as a child in Sunday School, first seeing these several Bible verses in the form of a picture drawn by Holman Hunt, titled "Christ Standing at the Door Knocking." I'm sure most of you are familiar with the painting. I can also remember the Sunday Church School teacher,

a loving and patient man, carefully asking our small class to look very closely at the picture to see if we noticed anything unusual about the door. None of us did. Then he pointed to the place on the outside of the door where there would normally be a door knob, latch, or handle with which to open the door from the outside. And he said, “Look, there’s no handle or knob there. The painter wants us to know that although Jesus patiently and gently knocks at the door of each of our lives, he does not force his way in. Each one of us, from the inside of our house, has to open the door.”

A mother and her daughter were looking at this picture of “Christ Standing at the Door Knocking.” They gazed for a few moments at the picture of Jesus standing motionless before the closed door, his hand raised as if knocking repeatedly. The mother said to her daughter, “I wonder why they won’t let him in.” After a bit of thought, the child replied, “Maybe they’re down in the basement and can’t hear him knocking, or maybe they’re too busy with other things.”

“All metaphors are imperfect,” said Robert Frost, “and that is the beauty of them.”

I like the metaphor of a door or doors because, in our lives as people trying to follow Jesus, there are doors to open and doors to close.

First of all, there are some doors in your life which only you can open — no one else can open them for you. The picture of Christ standing at the door knocking is one such very important door. It always needs to be opened from the inside. Jesus will not force his way into your life. He knocks and asks to be invited in, but you have to open the door. Someone else might encourage you to open the door, but you are the only one who can finally do it.
In a similar way, each one of us has to open our own door to friendship and other healthy human relationships. And others have to open the door to us. Another human being cannot force his or her way into your life, and you cannot force yourself into someone else’s life.

There are times when it is necessary for you to open the door to forgiveness. Let’s say someone has hurt you deeply. The individual who has hurt you might come to you and knock on your door, seeking to be forgiven. It is up to you then to open the door. And sometimes that means you have to put aside your pride, which can be blocking the door.

If you are sick and want to get well, you have to open the door to healing. One day, Jesus met a man who had been sick for many years, and the first question that Jesus asked him was, “Do you want to be healed?”

Secondly, while you might open a door for someone, that person has to decide whether or not to walk through that doorway. For example, you might take the initiative and open the door of forgiveness to someone, but that person then has to decide whether or not to cross the threshold and come in.
Another example: we are delighted to open the doors of this church to any and all people, especially those who are hurting and seeking the presence of God. Hopefully, we practice unconditional hospitality; however, each individual must decide whether or not to walk through that open door.

To open a door is to help someone overcome a barrier. Next year, when we hopefully will begin to build a much-needed addition onto this building, we will be opening new doors to others by making the building completely accessible to people with handicaps. Some of the doors in this building are now too narrow for people with wheelchairs to get through.

Thirdly, there are times when a door will open for us when we thought there was no door. You've had that experience. You might feel all hemmed in — it seems as if there is no way for you to do anything — you feel trapped. God is far away or absent. There seems to be no answer to your problem or dilemma. And then you discover a door you had not noticed before. For example, here's an individual who lost his job and looked for new employment day after day after day. Finally, it seemed as if there were no door of opportunity at all — and then, miracle of miracles, a door opened where he least expected it.

Note, fourthly, there are some doors in life that need to be closed. The best way to deal with some situations is simply to close the door. When our children were growing up, and especially in their teen years, it was their responsibility to keep their own rooms in the house in some order. Sometimes a room was so messy that we could not stand to look at it, and we soon learned that a good way to deal with the problem, instead of always nagging, was to simply close the door on that room and keep it closed as much as possible.

The same is true of life. There are times when we need to close the door. Yet we human beings have difficulty in closing the door. For example, we do not always close the door on our mistakes and failures. Even though they are in the past, we keep the door open and let them continue to haunt us. Sometimes the best thing we can do in life is simply close the door — not slam it shut in anger, but quietly and gently close it.

I see people all the time who have difficulty in closing the door on their regrets. They are always looking backward and regretting the things they have not done or the things they have done. I hear people continually saying, "If only I had done this five years ago, or if only I hadn't done that." And their life is filled with "if only's." Until they close the door on that part of their past, they are not able to open a new door to the present and the future. For each one of us, there are things we need to close the door on if we are to get on with our lives.

Today and on through the coming days and weeks, it is my hope that each one of you will consider what doors you need to close and what doors you need to open. Most of all, I hope you will open the door to God's presence in your life. It is the good news of the Christian faith that God's door is always open to you. Above all, remember the promise of Jesus: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me." Amen.