

Open the doors!

Isaiah 49:1-6, John 1:29-42

January 19, 2014

Here we are. It's a Sunday morning and we're in church. I have chosen to come here this morning and you have chosen to come here this morning.

Do you come here because you want to feel safe? Because you want to come to a place where you can be yourself without fear of being judged or laughed at or belittled? Because you want to come to a place where you are accepted and supported and affirmed and even loved? I do.

Do you come here to be saved? To be saved from a life that could otherwise seem rather pointless, to find here, among God's people and in God's word, a sense of purpose and meaning and lasting value for your life? To be saved from past missteps and mistakes and even grievous wrongs, and to be saved from future missteps and mistakes and sins? To be saved, to be made whole, to be made new, because you know you are loved, as you are, for always, by God, your Father? I do.

Do you come here to be reminded? Because in the hustle and bustle of all the to-do's and have-to's and want-to's of your week, you forget? Because you forget who you are? Because you forget what matters? Because you forget God? Because you forget to stop and look and consider the beauty of all of this -- the beauty of God, the beauty of the world God has made, your own beauty? Do you come here to be reminded? I do.

Do you come here to find intimacy? To experience a level of companionship, of personal connection, of a communion of lives you find no where else? To feel God close, to feel close to God, to feel connected to God, to be aware in a very real, even palpable way, of the presence of the living God? I do.

Do you suppose there are other people, people not here this morning, maybe not in any church this morning, who want the same things? People who want to feel safe, who are looking for a larger purpose to their lives besides serving themselves, who want to be reminded of beauty and of love, who want to feel connected to other people in a deeper way, who want to feel connected to God?

How will they find those things? Where will they find those things? Maybe here? But if they are going to find those things here, we will have to open the doors!

That's what Pope Francis says. In his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the gospel of joy, the subject of our Epiphany sermon series ... But wait, first, remember, it's titled the gospel of joy! It's about joy! And joy for whom? "Behold! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy ... to all the people!" In this written sermon, addressed not just to his church, but to all Christians everywhere, Francis declares "our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door." So they can find joy, too!

He means it quite literally. The doors of the church should be left open, so any may come in. But he also means it as a figure of speech, as an emblem for the mission of the church. Because we have a greater task: not just maintaining the faith, not just living the faith, not just keeping our lives in order to please God, not just offering ourselves in praise to God. No, the Lord says: "I have a greater task for you, my servant ... I will make you a light to the nations -- so that all the world may be saved."

Can you do that? Can you be a light to the nations? Can you be the means of saving the world? No, you can't. No, I can't. But we can. The church of Jesus Christ, the body of Jesus Christ, the bearers of the light that is Christ in us, can. And we must, because this is the greater task the Lord has given us, the greater task of which Francis reminds us. And we begin by opening the doors.

We open the doors to let people in.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here ...

That's what we say, and that's what Francis is saying! This is what excites me so much about this apostolic exhortation. He seems to speak, for the most part, not as a Roman Catholic, but as a Christian, not as the authoritative head of the one holy Roman Catholic Church, but as one follower of Jesus Christ to other followers. He invites all of us, all Christians, you and me and himself, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, to a renewed sense of our common identity and common purpose in Christ. We can talk together! We can work together!

And so Francis can say some things that sound truly extraordinary coming from the head of the Roman Catholic Church, but reflect instead a simple desire to follow in the way of Jesus and to make sharing the good news of Jesus, good news for all people, our top priority. He can say things like this:

There are other doors that should not be closed either. Everyone can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the

community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason ... The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak ...

Is he saying what I think he's saying? No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome ... at Christ's table? He must be, because he continues:

These convictions have pastoral consequences that we are called to consider with prudence and boldness. Frequently, we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone ...

Wow! Too often, we do act as arbiters of grace, rather than its facilitators. We are saved ... by grace. We are who we are ... by grace. We have real hope, for ourselves and for this world ... by grace. Grace is the good news.

Francis reminds the church that our "message [must] concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing," on grace and mercy and love, not on a plethora of doctrines and moral issues to be stridently imposed. When the church is too busy fighting the culture wars, the heart of the message, the heart of the gospel, the good news itself, is lost.

We are bearers of light, witnesses not crusaders. We have been entrusted with a priceless treasure, the good news of a gracious God who has come to us, to all of us, in Jesus Christ. "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Our job, our greater task, is to open the doors of our churches and our hearts, so that all may come in and find that treasure.

We open the doors to let people in, and we open the doors to let us out. Francis dreams of a church which "goes forth," a church organized around ...

a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation ...

It's not about self-preservation. It's not about maintaining a thriving institution. We do not retreat into our safe haven in the church and try to ignore the scary world out there.

On the contrary, Francis says he ...

prefer[s] a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.

More than by fear of going astray, he writes, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat ..."

I read this quote to our board of trustees last Tuesday evening and asked them what they thought a church that is bruised, hurting and dirty looks like. What do you think? It is hard to imagine, isn't it? Perhaps because we do focus much of our energy on making here a safe and comfortable and secure place to be.

What would it look like? A church that is bruised and hurting and dirty? I don't know, but, at least, I think, it would be a church that tries, that takes risks, that goes where there are bruises and hurts and dirt, a church that goes where Jesus goes. "Behold the lamb of God!" And what becomes of the lamb? It is bruised and hurt and made dirty, for our sake, to save us.

So we open the doors, we go forth, we go out on the streets, to where the people are, to where the hurt is ... but not too quickly. Huh? Not too quickly? Francis writes:

Going out to others in order to reach the fringes of humanity does not mean rushing out aimlessly into the world. Often it is better simply to slow down, to put aside our eagerness in order to see and listen to others, to stop rushing from one thing to another and to remain with someone who has faltered along the way ...

He's right, isn't he? It's not really about the programs or protests or campaigns or relief missions we can organize. It's about taking time, taking time to be with someone, one person at a time.

He says: "Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time." What is your most precious possession? Isn't it time? If you give money away, you can always get more, but if you give away your time, you cannot get it back. Time is the most precious gift you have to offer anyone.

And that's the gift Jesus offered. I think Jesus taught Francis to slow down, and gave him the wisdom to tell us now to slow down. When Andrew and another disciple of John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you live, Rabbi?," Jesus answered, "Come and see." And he spent the rest of the day with them.

Jesus was always taking time for people: a woman at a well, a blind beggar sitting at the side of the road, a sick old woman who reached out to touch his robe, a tax collector in a tree, a Pharisee with a burning question, a madman in the caves, children. Jesus spent time with Andrew, and Andrew told his brother Simon and brought him to Jesus, and Jesus called him Peter, and Peter became the first in a long line of church leaders that leads now to Francis, and Peter became one of the first in a long line of followers of Jesus that leads now to you.

I want to leave you with one more wise word from Francis. He has reminded us of our greater task, to shine Christ's light into the world, by opening the doors and letting people in, letting them hear and letting them feel the joy of the good news of God's grace, and by opening the doors and going forth ourselves, not too hastily, but giving people, giving some one, the gift of our time.

But Francis also cautions us to remember that it doesn't depend on us. We open the doors. We let the word be heard and seen. And then we wait. We wait to see what happens. Because, as he writes:

God's word is unpredictable in its power. The Gospel speaks of a seed which, once sown, grows by itself, even as the farmer sleeps. The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word, which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking.

So just do it. Just open the doors, carry the message, and watch what God will do!