

“The most important part of any church is the front door.” That’s what one distinguished church architect told the building committee at my vicarage congregation. The church had outgrown their building and were now hoping to move into a new one by Easter. “Really? The front door’s the most important?” had I actually heard him right? “I mean, I would’ve assumed the most important part would be the sanctuary . . . or the baptismal font . . . or at the very least the fellowship hall . . . maybe even the pulpit!” I grinned inside. But no, he said, the most important part of any church is the front door.

See, the front door, he explained, is the first thing newcomers encounter about a church. It’s the first impression they get, like a church’s handshake. Just think about banks, for example. When banks changed their front doors, it was a signal of a fundamental shift in business. In the early 1900s, he pointed out, banks were built to look like fortresses—their front doors thick and heavy, solid and impenetrable—to make you think your money was safe and secure. But then in the middle of the century, banks decided to change their image. Gone were the big, thick, heavy doors, traded out for more open, transparent glass doors. Banks now wanted to attract customers, put a warm and friendly face on banking. Being able to look into the bank and see the activity going on inside, you felt welcomed. Banks now felt more accessible. Perhaps instead of big “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” style doors, churches should also have doors that are just waiting to welcome.

Not all doors that welcome though are quite so welcoming. I can still remember the door to the principal’s office in my elementary school. Cut in the door was a long, tall window, making it so you could see into the office—welcoming, right? But as you peered inside, there you’d see the austere, no-nonsense, foreboding man sitting behind the desk. Right in front of him were set two chairs facing him—everyone knew they were meant for kids who misbehaved. What kind of punishments were dealt there—fines, phone calls to parents, floggings? The only way to enter through the door to that office was with your knees shaking, your hands trembling, your heart pounding.

As a pastor, some of the most interesting doors I encounter are hospital room doors. When I go see a member of the congregation who’s a patient, I’m always relieved when I find the door open. That tells me that the person I’m seeing is awake and alert, ready for visitors. But when the door is closed, that’s usually not a good sign. Now, it could just mean that they’re up and using the restroom, which means I find a place outside the room to wait. But other times it can mean that nurses or doctors are busy with them, or even that they’re too sick to see anyone—even *me*. There I stand behind closed doors, I might ask around the nurses station how so-and-so’s doing or try to read a chart on the wall. Gently I knock, slowly opening the door, wondering what this visit will hold.

Other pastoral visits, I walk up to the front door of the house, knock on the door, and listen—rustling inside. Next, the unlocking of the door—first the chain latch, then the key turns the deadbolt, last the doorknob twists. Slowly, cautiously, the door opens, but only a crack. A voice on the other side asks, “Who is it?” While I get the need for security, at the same time, this just doesn’t feel like any way to begin a pastoral visit. From where I stand, it feels anything but hospitable. Even doors that should be open, sometimes feel more ominous.

So, what’s the chief function of the door, anyway? Is it mainly for entering or exiting? Are doors built primarily with those on the outside in mind, or those on the inside? Is the purpose of the door to keep people out or to welcome them in?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus says that *He* is a door, *the* door. You hear Jesus say a lot of things like this in John’s Gospel.

“I am the resurrection and the life.”

“I am the good shepherd.”

“I am the vine.”

“I am the light of the world.”

“I am the bread of life.”

But this Sunday, “I am the door.” So, what does that mean?

There are some, like most major religions who have no trouble seeing God as a door. He’s like those early banks with those thick, heavy, solid doors with five different locks—like an impenetrable fortress, it’s tough to get to Him. Except maybe if you’ve been a good person—y’know, really, really nice and sweet, helped a lotta people. Or, maybe if you’ve proved your devotion—taken all the steps, jumped through all the hoops, followed every rule. Or, maybe if you’ve kept your nose clean—staying away from enough bad stuff and filling your life with enough good stuff. Then maybe, just maybe God’ll open up and let you in—maybe He’d do that even for you. Trouble is, how d’you know, like *really know*, that you’ll get in? Unfortunately, there’s just no guarantee.

Then, there are others who believe God isn’t just an open, accessible door, but is no door at all. They’re the kind of people who say that all roads lead to God. God’s got just some giant hole to heaven, a wide-open entryway for anyone and everyone. Come as you please—admittance for all. The trouble here is less obvious, but there’s trouble nevertheless. If this were the case, then there’d be no one God wasn’t grabbing and pulling in—even if they came kicking and screaming. Even if someone wanted nothing to do with Him at all, had no desire to stay with Him whatsoever, they’d be forced to spend an eternity with God against their will. Could you imagine a loving God ever doing that?

But then here comes Jesus today, blowing both theories right out of the water! God is no thick, heavy door. But neither is God *not* a door. No, in Jesus, God *is* a door. And as we’ll hear Him say next week, He’s the way, the truth, and the life—nobody’s getting to the Father except through Him. So, the question still stands—what kind of door?

My guess is, that’s the way we think of things. At the end of our life’s journey before us will stand a door, the portal to Paradise. And, of course, Jesus is just such a door. But what I find so interesting about this text is that Jesus doesn’t say, “I *will* be the door.” Jesus doesn’t say, “One day, sometime way off in the distant future when you die, there I’ll be, the door.” No, it’s here, now, present tense, on this very planet, standing among sinners—a time like ours in a place like ours, and with people like us—that Jesus says, “I am the door.” Which makes me wonder if we’re not looking at this whole door thing all wrong.

Many of you know my middle name is Vesper, but not all of you know why. No, I’m not named after Vespers, the service of evening prayer. I’m actually named after my great uncle, Vesper Wurster, who lived just outside Buffalo, NY. Every year whenever we’d visit him, I’d stop and stare at this one picture he had up on his wall. I’m sure most of you have seen it, it’s by the nineteenth-century English painter Holman Hunt. It’s a painting based on the well-known verse in Revelation 3: “I stand at the door and knock.” It’s got Jesus standing there in the darkness, holding a lamp in one hand, knocking on a door with the other. Truly, it’s a beautiful image of Jesus. It’s no wonder so many people like it.

What always struck me though was how it wasn’t the typical scenario we usually picture—Jesus with open arms, waiting there for us to finally walk through those pearly gates. Rather, it was as if Jesus just couldn’t wait anymore—He’d lost patience, just had to get to us. So there He is, the light of the world, knocking on our door in the darkness, bringing His light to us. According to the painting, Jesus is in a rush to get to us.

Now, just pause a moment and think about that. Here we've been talking about this door image as if it's just about Jesus getting us to God at the end of our lives. While this is true, when Jesus says, "I am the door," perhaps He means something else. What if Jesus is saying that the traffic is moving in the *other* direction? Maybe Jesus is how *God gets to us!*

Let's examine the evidence. When Jesus kicks off His ministry, some of His first words are, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." "The kingdom's here," Jesus says, "standing right in front of your faces." It's like He's come not to bring us to heaven, but to bring heaven to us. Like "I am the door," He might as well say, "*I am* the kingdom of heaven."

Or how 'bout Exhibit B. Think of how Jesus says in John 1:51, "You will see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man." He's the overlap, the conjunction, the point on the grid where heaven and earth meet. When the angels try to figure out which route to take to get to earth, they take Jesus. It's like Jesus could say, "*I am* the new Jacob's ladder."

Another bit of proof. On the cross, when the flesh of Jesus gets torn apart from top to bottom—the thorns on His brow down to the holes in His feet—the tearing doesn't stop there. From top to bottom, the heavy curtain coming between us and God in the temple is also torn apart. And it's not just to rip open heaven for us, but since Jesus did it on *our* clock and on *our* soil could it be that He's ripped our world wide open for God! As Jesus is hanging on the cross, it's as if He's hanging a door for heaven to come pouring into our existence. With every hole poked in His body, Jesus is punching giant gaps where God's blessing now spills into our lives. No wonder then that Jesus says, "I am the door"!

Let me remind you of a story that Jesus tells about a door. A wayward son had reached the end of his rope and decided out of desperation it was to go back home. He had offended his dad, disgraced his family, blown through his inheritance, and now the only choice left was to return to his estranged father. As he traveled back he must've wondered what kind of door he would find.

Would it be a door shut tight—an angry father on the other side?

Would it be a door ajar—his father mulling things over?

Would it be a door thrown open—a father willing to accept his son . . . but only after teaching him a lesson first?

But nothing could've prepared this prodigal for what was about to happen. Never in his wildest dreams would he have imagined what would come next.

Just as the son was making his way toward the door at the end of his journey, the door came rushing his way. All of a sudden, out of nowhere, here comes his father at full speed. Arms stretched out, love and reconciliation flung wide. Before the son could even get a word out, all the affections of a father's heart came pouring out. This lost son now found himself lost again, this time in a tender embrace. Even before he could get there, the door to home, the door to sonship, the door to restoration just couldn't wait another second, but came madly racing to the place where he was.

It's not true what they say—heaven really *can't* wait. Just when we think we're on our way to heaven, heaven comes *our way*. *Here, now*, Jesus carves out heaven's door again in this place. Not just so that you can get *there*, but so that there can get to you. In Word and Sacrament God comes rushing. Stretching out from kingdom come, He reaches toward you with gifts and blessing, love and forgiveness, life and eternity. Just look—Jesus, your door, stands wide open for you—giving you God, but even more, giving God *you*.