

Sermon March 25, 2018

Through the Gate

Mark 11:1-11

The Reverend Roger Pancost

Since Ash Wednesday, the door that is behind me has adorned this sanctuary. Throughout the season of Lent this door has served as a symbol for the spiritual journey. We have been invited to go through a metaphorical door to a deeper connection with God.

Today, as we begin Holy Week, we find ourselves at another door. This door, or gate, is the one that Jesus goes through to enter Jerusalem. Jerusalem, like other cities of the near east, is surrounded by a high wall. This wall was built to protect the inhabitants of Jerusalem from invading armies. In order to enter the city, a person has to go through one of several gates, or doorways. Because Jesus is coming from Bethany he enters through the East Gate.

Ironically, the enemies of Jesus are not on the outside of the wall, but on the inside. In the weeks leading up to his entry into the city of Jerusalem Jesus has predicted three times that he will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes, betrayed into human hands, and killed.

And so the question is: Why would Jesus choose to go through this door when he knows that there are people plotting to kill him?

I believe that Jesus makes this decision for the same reason that he has done everything in his life...love. Jesus will not allow a few misguided people to stop him from proclaiming God's love for the world. With great courage and conviction Jesus makes his way through the door and into the city.

The courage that Jesus demonstrates that day is a continuation of the courage he has always demonstrated:

In a culture where some religious leaders used their authority to manipulate others...Jesus exposed their hypocrisy.

In a culture where people avoided contact with those who were sick...Jesus reached out in love and touched them.

In a culture where unjust laws punished women...Jesus stood with them.

In a culture where children were considered to have no value...Jesus embraced them.

In a culture where people were encouraged to retaliate against their enemies... Jesus taught forgiveness.

Jesus knows that all of these acts are leading to his death, and yet, out of love, he enters the door to Jerusalem.

To follow Jesus is to follow his example of courageous love. Sometimes this involves going through a door towards the unknown, despite the dangers involved. It is not difficult to find examples of people who have demonstrated such courage:

On September 11, 2001, this courageous love was revealed in the actions of rescue workers, and many others, who risked their lives in order to save others. Twenty-four year-old Welles Crowther was an equities trader on the 104th floor. Having served as a volunteer firefighter in his teens, Welles made his way down to the 78th floor sky lobby. Amid the smoke, chaos and debris, Welles helped injured and disoriented office workers to safety, risking his own safety in the process. He then directed people to the stairwell and encouraged them to help others while he carried an injured woman on his back. After bringing her down 15 floors to safety, Welles made his way back up to help others. His body was recovered alongside firefighters in a stairwell heading back up the towers. Welles, along with 412 emergency workers, lost their lives helping others.

A few years ago the world community became frightened by an outbreak of Ebola in West Africa. Monia Sayah, A Doctors Without Borders nurse, volunteered to go to Guinea. When Monia arrived she came face-to-face with the fears of the people who didn't know if Ebola would hit their families or their villages. Despite these fears, Monia cared for the sick. After serving for 11 weeks in Guinea Monia said that she herself was not afraid. Monia, and countless other medical professionals, risked their own well-being to love and serve others.

The stories of Welles and Monia are just two examples of the many individuals, who have demonstrated the love of Jesus. A love that does not count the cost, but rushes through the door to help others.

We may never find ourselves being called to love in such a powerful way, and yet every day we are given opportunities to love the way that Jesus loved. As Reverend Michael Battle states, "The true measure of our love must comprise the capacity to extend ourselves in real acts of compassion toward the afflicted, forcing

us to come out of ourselves. This act requires the greatest love.” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2, p. 157)

Just like rescue workers, and medical professionals, we never know what doors such love will lead us through:

Sometimes it leads us to speak out against the bigoted remarks of another.

Sometimes it leads us to help someone who is in need.

Sometimes it leads us to the bedside of one who is dying.

Sometimes it leads us to work towards creating greater justice.

Sometimes it leads us to share our resources with others.

Sometimes it leads us to stand with those who are being bullied or abused.

Sometimes it leads us to challenge the hypocrisy of those who say they speak for God.

I will admit that I do not always feel courageous when confronted with such opportunities for love. There are times in which my fears about security and reputation keep me from saying what is on my heart, or doing what I know to be right. Other times I fear how my actions will be received. Perhaps you can relate to what I am saying.

It is important to remember that the original followers of Jesus were no different than any one of us. There were times when fear kept them from moving forward. At other times their fears caused them to deny knowing Jesus.

God did not give up on them, and God does not give up on us. Our failures to love in the past do not prevent us from reaching out in love in the present or the future.

Jesus courageously entered the city of Jerusalem trusting that God’s love was guiding him and that death could not stop that love.

Like Jesus, we can trust that God’s love is guiding us as we courageously strive to love others. Amen.

