

“People of the Open Door”

Romans 5:1-8

“My door is always open.” That statement sounds like good news to most of us. If an employer, teacher or elected official speaks those words to us with a welcoming smile, it means we enjoy access to that person — that this worthy person will make time for us, no matter what else may be going on.

That’s the policy many of us operate under as pastors. Most of us are prepared to make time if the need is urgent. Figuratively speaking, our office doors are always open. A big part of ministry is offering people access to ourselves.

Access is a precious commodity in our world. In Washington, D.C., lobbyists pay big money in the form of campaign contributions to buy access to elected officials. Whenever a former senator or member of the president’s cabinet signs on with one of those lobbying agencies a few blocks from the Capitol, ethical alarms go off. Such a move causes consternation along the banks of the Potomac River. These former officials have recently had extraordinary access to the highest levels of government. It now appears they’re trying to sell that access to the highest bidder.

Access is an issue for members of racial-ethnic minorities trying to move into certain neighborhoods — just as it is for businesswomen seeking access to male-dominated social clubs where so many business deals are cut over lunches.

Now imagine, just for fun, how great it would feel to find ourselves in an elevator with our favorite movie star or recording artist — to have exclusive access to that person, if only for a few moments.

In today's New Testament lesson, Paul speaks about access — access to grace. “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,” he rejoices, “through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand.” The most important access of all — access to the grace of God, through Jesus Christ — is absolutely free. It cost Jesus a trip to the cross — but it costs us nothing.

A preacher, having given a sermon on grace in a small mining town, was approached at the church door by one of the miners. The man was looking distraught. He told the preacher he'd give anything if only he could believe that God really forgives sins.

“I can't believe he'll forgive me if I just turn to him,” the miner admitted. “It's too cheap.”

“You were working in the mine yesterday, weren't you?” the preacher asked.

“Yes, of course,” said the miner.

“And how did you get out of the pit?”

“The way I usually do; I got into the cage and was pulled to the top.”

“How much did you pay to come out of the pit?”

“Why, nothing,” the miner admitted.

“You weren't afraid to trust yourself to the cage? Was it not too cheap?”

“Oh, no,” said the miner. “It was cheap for me, but it cost the company a lot of money to sink that shaft.”

As soon as he said it, a change came over the miner's face. He saw the preacher's meaning. Forgiveness is free for us — but it was purchased at a terrible price, a price paid by Jesus on the cross.

The essential task of the Christian — the one spiritual discipline from which all else flows — is to accept that truth. That’s what Paul means by “justification by faith.” We don’t deserve access to this amazing grace. We haven’t earned it. Yet, Christ offers it freely. We have only to accept the gift.

The Polish astronomer Copernicus was one of the greatest scientists in history. But Copernicus was also a man of faith. He had these words inscribed on his tombstone: “O God, the faith that you gave to St. Paul I cannot ask, and the mercy you did show to St. Peter I dare not ask; but, Lord, the grace you did show to the dying thief on the cross — that, Lord, show to me.”

That grace is all any of us can claim. The thief crucified beside Jesus turns to him before he dies and says, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answers, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

Access to grace. It’s a wonder we have it, but we do. The word of Jesus to us is that the door is always open. We can stay away if we wish, and we can engage in all manner of sinful lifestyles and activities, but when the time comes that we really need grace, when the day dawns that we’re ready to make a change, the door is open.

The Greek word Paul uses for “access” literally means “having an introduction.” It’s as though we were travelers to a foreign land, carrying with us letters of introduction to the court of the king.

A great many of us already possess such a letter of introduction to a foreign government. That’s what a passport is, literally: a letter of introduction. If you, as a citizen of the United States, open your passport, you’ll read these words on the first page:

“The Secretary of State of the United States of America hereby requests all whom it may concern to permit the citizen/national of the United States named herein to pass without delay or hindrance and in case of need to give all lawful aid or protection.”

It’s a letter of introduction. When Paul celebrates “access to grace,” he’s picturing a small scroll, rolled up and bearing the wax seal of a king or governor. You can’t cross the border without a passport; and you can’t experience the grace of God without presenting your “letter of introduction” — your confession of what Christ has done for you.

It also has the sense of a harbor or haven. Sailors always want to know where the nearest harbor is so they can beat a straight course to safety in case a storm blows up.

Imagine what it’s like to be on a small boat, far out to sea. You can barely glimpse the shoreline, a low smudge along the horizon. The sailors know the rough location of a small opening, an inlet, that leads to a sheltered harbor. Finding it, though, is like locating the proverbial needle in a haystack!

Sailors think themselves fortunate if they have a lighthouse beacon to guide them, and, when the fog drops thick upon the surface of the sea, a foghorn calls out in its deep bass voice to guide them home.

God is not some distant, remote, uncaring being. In Jesus Christ, God comes to us personally. Christ is our letter of introduction, the lighthouse beacon that guides us into the safe harbor.

We, as Christians, as members of this community of faith we call Divinity, have a responsibility to help others discover the same open door to grace that has been granted to us.

Those of us physically here in this worship space came through an open door to hear and experience God's grace in the preaching and singing of God's Word and in the receiving of God's grace and presence in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

During the pandemic, Divinity and many congregations across our land opened another door to God's grace through streaming our worship services. Congregations were blessed with the money to install streaming and video equipment. I'm told by our communications board that our projector and lights are over 15 years old and only by the grace of God are still functioning. They estimate it will cost \$20,000 to replace them. So, in our Building Maintenance Fund we've created a designated line for "projector and lights" and hope that both streamers and those of us here will designate gifts for that purpose.

Our Divinity doors are open in welcoming everyone. On some Sunday afternoons and some Wednesday nights we're opening our doors to two start-up congregations, both with black pastors, renting our space to celebrate and give thanks for God's grace. We continue to open our doors to 3 A.A. groups, and Al-Anon group, summer YMCA day camp, a widow's support group, a girl scout troop, a sewing group, a knitting group, a H-vac training class, music lessons, many celebrations in our fellowship hall, and the list goes on. Divinity's doors are definitely open. We are people of the open door!

Lesslie Newbigin, the renowned missionary bishop of the Church of South India, once said, "The knowledge of God comes to any person never through the skylight but always through the door." It is by the witness of others that we most easily learn about Jesus Christ —

Not by reading gospel tracts, not by hearing Scripture quoted at us by t.v. preachers, but by honest sharing with other Christians, people who care enough to let us into their lives, in small ways or large. It happens in a Sunday school classroom, or over a cup of coffee in the narthex. It happens through a handshake or fist bump during the passing of the peace time in the worship service, through the words, “Peace be with you.” It happens in a casual conversation in the workplace, or while visiting with the bank teller. Many and marvelous are the opportunities to subtly and honestly offer ourselves to others so that, when they get to know us as people, they may discover also the faith within us.

As Christians, we’re called to live as people of the open door — receiving grace, holding the door open for others, and holding ourselves open for others.

Grace, says the Christian ethicist Lew Smedes, is “an amazing power to look earthy reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, feel its cruel cuts ... and yet feel in your deepest being that it is good and right for you to be alive on God’s good earth. Grace is power ... to see life very clearly, admit it is sometimes all wrong, and still know that, somehow, in the center of your life, ‘It’s all right.’”

May we all come to learn, day by day, to rely on God’s grace alone. Trusting in God’s promises, may we know ever more fully God’s grace as we have seen it in Jesus Christ. May you realize, in the deepest part of us, that our Lord truly offers access to grace!

May the peace of God . . .

#641 – All Are Welcome