

Readings: Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

Grace and peace to you from God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

If memory serves me right, it was in the rural, Midwestern church where I grew up. There just behind the altar. It was a painting. I wouldn't be surprised if you've seen it. Jesus stands next to the door of a house with his hand poised to knock. And, at least the way I remember it, Jesus looks out with deep eyes that somehow softly yet strongly beckon.

It's not a bad portrait of Jesus. The underlying story of the portrait is that Jesus is knocking on the door of your life, yearning to get in. You can imagine Jesus waiting at the front door of your family's house. Waiting patiently, yearning to be let in. Quietly, softly yet strongly beckoning to be a part of your life.

I remember a professor commenting on this image of Jesus, pointing out that if you look closely in this portrait there's no door knob on the door. The underlying suggestion, of course, is that it's up to you to unlock the door on the other side and let Jesus in. But it would be a much more interesting painting, this professor suggested, if it showed the other side of the door. Because if we're realistic about the power of sin over ourselves and in our lives, if we're realistic about *the demons named "legion" that control us* (to put it in the language of the Gospel reading for today), then the other side of the door would tell a different story...

Dead bolt locks and those chains that you find on hotel doors, both run up and down the length of the door. And there you and I are, one of us with a hammer and nail in the darkness puts two by fours across the door. Another of us pushes furniture up against the door. We do everything we possibly can, to keep Christ from calling us out of the safety, the comfort, the familiarity of our homes.

It seems to me our readings turn the traditional portrait of Jesus knocking on the door inside out. Go back to the other side of the door with the first reading for today. "I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said, 'Here I am, here I

am,' to a nation that did not call on my name." The God of Isaiah apparently isn't patiently knocking on the door waiting for it to be opened. This God has a shoulder to the door and is just about ready to get out the battering ram.

But go back again to the other side of the door with Paul in his letter to the Galatians. We hear in the second reading: "Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith." According to Paul, before Christ comes, it is like we build a prison out of our homes, around ourselves and one another. We lock the door and toss the key beyond our reach.

I don't care if you go to church every week, if you read your bible every day, if you regularly drop \$5 or \$500 in the offering plate (of course, you're always welcome to drop \$500 in the offering plate, I won't stop you). I don't care what you do with your life or how much you've accomplished, the prison that we daily build ourselves into is much more difficult to escape than we would probably like to admit. The demons that run our lives have a much firmer grip on our throats than we are generally able to confess.

You know, it's a bit of a paradox, but often those of us who "have it together" have a harder time admitting this truth than those who live daily with a demon like alcoholism or mental illness, Alzheimer's or HIV or AIDS... the list of demons is long and "Legion," isn't it. But, those who "have it together" are much more susceptible to that more subtle demon of self-righteousness, thinking that our faith could carry us to heaven and back again.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, to put it in the terms of that popular portrait of Jesus standing at the door; there may be no door knob, but the Jesus that is painted through the verses of this reading is a Jesus who is ready to take a battering ram to the doors of our lives, to get at those demons that dwell with us. He's standing with the ax that John the Baptist spoke about, ready to chop through all the boards we try to nail against the door. And let me tell you, we are no match for this God, neither are the demons.

But still we try, don't we? We add new locks every day for ourselves and our neighbors and all of creation. We are a people that has skillfully built an economy imprisoned in on itself through a dependence (shall we say

it?) through an *addiction* to oil. And we might not feel the burden very much here in the Black Hills of South Dakota, but you don't have to watch CNN or Fox news very long before you see the scar in the Gulf Coast. And, all day long, we just stand behind the locked door and shout to God on the other side of the door, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" *What does oil have to do with religion?* "I beg you, do not torment me!" *Leave me alone.*

We add lock upon lock every day for ourselves and our neighbors and all creation. I don't care if you go to church regularly or not, read the bible regularly or not, "have it together" (if that's possible) or not... We are a people who know too well how to build up walls of division.

Boundaries abound. Lines are drawn in the sand. One side conservative, the other liberal. Rural vs. urban. Pro-life vs. pro-choice. American vs. "un-American" or "illegal alien." Heterosexual vs. homosexual. Us vs. them. And all day long, we stand behind our locked door and shout to whoever might be on the other side, "What have you to do with me...? I beg you, just leave us alone!" Leave us alone in the safety, the comfort, the familiarity of our homes.

"But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

What would Paul write today? This list is a list of the most significant divisions of Paul's day. Are we willing to hear God's word today, coming as it might be, not like some teddy bear of a message, but like an axe chopping down our front door?

"But now that faith has come...As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer conservative or liberal. There is no longer rural or urban. There is no longer pro-life or pro-choice. There is no longer American or "un-American" or "illegal alien." There is no longer heterosexual or homosexual. There is no longer us and them; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

We often talk about faith in terms of *decisions*. That we must *decide* to open up the door for Jesus to come into our lives. Brothers and sisters in Christ, I wonder if we haven't lost touch with the meaning of the word *decide*. It was pointed out to me this week that the word *decide* has as its root: “-cide.” It's the same root that we find in the words *homicide* or *insecticide*. It means to kill or to die.

If there is a decision involved with faith, if there is a choice that we must exercise to let God in our lives... the choice is simply this – to die to ourselves. To die daily to sin and self-righteousness. To let the demons and dependencies, the addictions and cravings that control our lives, our communities, our economies; to let them be drowned like a large herd of swine running off the cliff into the lake. All because Jesus “gave permission” for it to be so.

If there's anything that we learn from Jesus, it is that God can take disaster and transform it into new life. That God in Christ Jesus can take death and bring out of it resurrection.

“Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.” Jesus tells the one from whom the demons had gone. May you be fed, nourished and sent home as well today. Free from the power of sin, liberated from the demons that once dwelled with you.

And once you have died to yourself for this day, may you again be about the work you are called and sent to... the work of opening doors and exorcising demons. Amen.