

God's Open Door Policy

This morning's reading from the book of 1 Kings takes us back almost three thousand years to the tenth century B.C., when Solomon was king of Israel. It was King Solomon who built the first Temple in Jerusalem. Solomon's Temple was viewed as the house of God. In symbolic terms, it was where God resided. It was God's home on earth. The Temple was a visible and material symbol of God's presence. It reassured the people of Israel that God was with them. The Temple became the focal point for Israel's national and religious life.

Prior to the Temple's construction, the people of Israel worshipped in a moveable tent in which they kept the ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was a chest that contained the two stone tablets of the law, the ten commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai. The Israelites carried it before them as they wandered through the wilderness. It represented both the presence of God and the covenantal relationship between God and Israel.

At the dedication of the Temple, the priests bring the ark of the covenant from the tent into the inner sanctuary of the Temple where it is to reside permanently. Solomon stands for the altar of God in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spreads out his hands to heaven, and prays to God.

He acknowledges that even heaven cannot contain God, much less this house that Solomon was built. Nevertheless, the Temple is to have special divine significance, because it is the place of which God had said, "My name shall be here."

So Solomon prays that God will be attentive to the prayers offered at the Temple – that God's eyes may be open night and day toward this house" and that God will heed his prayers and those of the people of Israel.

Solomon, the king of Israel prays to the God of Israel, on behalf of the people of Israel. But he doesn't stop there. Solomon goes on to pray on behalf of foreigners as well: "Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name – for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand and your outstretched arm – when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear from heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know

your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

So, the king of Israel prays that the God of Israel will hear and answer the prayers not just of Israel, but of all people! That foreigners, outsiders, people not from Israel, could come to Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem and pray to God wasn't even a question! That they would be welcome was assumed!

In Psalm 84 it talks about the temple as well. It sings of the Temple as a place of joy, and happiness, of security and protection. Even birds find a home there, a place to nest and lay their young. "A day in God's courts is better than a thousand elsewhere", the Psalmist says. "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness."

I'm interested in this image of a doorkeeper. A doorkeeper usually holds the door open for people entering and exiting a building. A doorkeeper greets people at the door as they come in and says goodbye to them as they depart. But more than that, a doorkeeper also usually plays the role of "gatekeeper in the sense of letting some people enter while barring others from coming in. Maybe you've seen that on tv where there is a popular night club with a long line of people wanting to get in and bouncers at the door determining who can and can't enter based on how attractive they are, how stylish they dress, or whether they're on the "A-list."

Several years ago the United Methodist Church launched a slogan that said this: "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors." The campaign sought to reach people who felt alienated from the church. The focus groups found that there was a strong negative feelings about churches in general, regardless of denomination. A large percentage of respondents said they held churches to be responsible for past hurts in their lives and many traced their feelings of inadequacy to negative church experiences. Too many congregations, they said, left them feeling unwelcome, financially inadequate and inappropriately dressed."

So the United Methodist Church figured out they had a pretty good idea with this slogan. Until several of us pointed out that there needed to be an asterisk after Open Doors that said "Unless you're gay."

Because I had plenty of pastor colleagues who have told me, "Of course our church is welcoming of all people." To which I challenged, "Even gay people?" To which they responded, "Of course." And so then I countered, "So they can hold

hands? Can they put their arms around each other while singing hymns.” But the answer was “They are welcome to come into the church if they are willing to change.” Can they celebrate a baptism of their child in your church?”

Again, open hearts, open doors, open minds asterisk, unless you’re gay. That’s why I truly appreciate the way we read our welcoming statement every single Sunday and I appreciate it because like I talked about a few weeks ago, we are specific. We say who is welcomed here. We aren’t generic so that people think they are walking into a safe space and find out that they are really welcome only if they are willing to change who they are.

This may be a stretch, but I wonder if God’s open door policy should extend beyond the church to our nation as a whole? Immigration policy in the United States has been a hot topic because of the former president but it has been a mess for decades. We have seen certain politicians try to blame immigrants for bringing in the Delta Variant because they need a scape goat. It can’t be the fact that masks and vaccine’s have been politicized, it MUST be the immigrants at the southern border. And now we are seeing thousands of refugees trying to flee Afghanistan and the discussion will be whether we should let them in because they could be terrorists, instead of people, especially women whose very lives are in danger by this new regime. When talking about fleeing refugees, Sean Hannity called them an infestation that is coming to your neighborhood.

Steve Cortes, a news anchor from the scary NEWS Max station posted this picture on twitter and said, Raise your hand if you want this plane landing in your town? America paid unimaginable costs in Afghanistan because of uniparty globalists who dominated the Bush and Obama administrations. No more. To which someone else responded, if you are a Christian, you better have your hand raised!

There is no question that our nation needs comprehensive immigration reform. Our current system is clearly not working. If it was, we wouldn’t have 11 million undocumented immigrants here in the first place. But rounding them all up and deporting them isn’t a viable solution. Realize that 88 % have been here for at least 5 years. Sixty two percent have been here for at least 10 years and of those, about 45 percent own their own homes and pay taxes. They may be undocumented, but they have nevertheless woven themselves in the fabric of our nation.

The lawyer for the new family living in our church, couldn't believe we, 1. took them in at the last minute, and 2. told them they could stay as long as they needed to. I just responded, "This is what the church is called to do." Right?

We dare not lose sight of the fact that we are a nation that was built by immigrants. Some of our families came by ship, some more recently by plane. Most came here voluntarily, seeking freedom and economic opportunity. Some were brought here against their will as slaves. But except for the small communities of Native Americans that still remain, the rest of us are from families who came to this country from somewhere else. Who, then are we, to turn around and say to new immigrants, "You don't belong here?"

What does God's open door policy have to say to U.S. immigration policy? How do we welcome the stranger at our door?

Maybe an answer lies at the base of the Statue of Liberty, in the immortal poem by Emma Lazarus entitled, "The New Colossus"

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame, with conquering limbs astride from land to land.

With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Beautiful words! Can we live up to them as a nation? Can we live up to them as a church? I hope so, with God's help. Amen