

“Crossing the Threshold”

Psalm 100

John 10:7-10

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First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

Dedication of the Cornerstone Courtyard

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

*Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and not we ourselves;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations. (Psalm 100)*

*Again Jesus said to them, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came
before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate.*

*Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief
comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it
abundantly.” (John 10:7-10)*

Liminal. It is a marvelous word in religion and anthropology; it is almost anomatapoetic. I came across it in a sermon recently when I was researching church thresholds for the dedication of our courtyard entrance today. Liminal. It comes from the Latin *limen*, literally meaning threshold, and more broadly the source of our English word “line.” The sermon I found – from a U.C.C. pastor at Wellesley – reminds us that “liminal” “was coined by anthropologists studying symbolism ... in tribal cultures to describe the state one enters in successful rituals. Victor Turner, who developed the modern notion of liminality, says that persons in liminal states are neither here nor there. They are, ‘betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, culture, convention, and ceremonial.’ They are straddling the threshold between this world and another, standing in the overlap of the two. The rules of this place no longer apply, reality as we know it is no longer real. Visions come freely in such a place. New worlds are imagined. God is recognized... . Time stretches. So do we. And we come back from that space transformed, bearing our visions and experiences with us to the mundane world, which we are then compelled by our experience to transform.” (Rev. Quinn Caldwell, “In the Doorway of the Tent,” preached Feb. 8, 2004, Wellesley Village Church, Wellesley, MA, found on www.wellesleyvillagechurch.org/sermons/2004/20040208_doorway.htm).

Today we are dedicating our new courtyard entrance – the landscaping, the window, the entryway itself. It is a beautiful work; indeed, it received an award from the Historical Society for recovering the look of the original church entrance. Great pains were made to get the details right; much effort and time and many generous donations made it possible. Why does it matter? I suspect that each donor has his or her own reasons. But I suspect beneath

them all there lies the same essential, perhaps even primal, motivation: because the threshold to the church is a liminal space – a crossing over from one world to another, from a place where one set of values is offered to a place where a different reality is named. A place where an alternative set of hopes is set free, where new visions are possible, where God is recognized.

This is not the only liminal place in the world, of course -- hardly the only place where we meet God; nor is Sunday morning the only time we are aware of our sublime Maker. The sovereignty of God claims jurisdiction over all the earth, as today's Psalm reminds us. We can – and should – discover God's presence in a thousand places in our daily lives. The freshness of creation in the early morning walk on the beach. The innocent tenderness in the touch of a child's hand. The delicious possibility in the crack of the spine of a new book. These moments when we feel and see God's tender nearness or staggering majesty, these sacred moments can break through in our most ordinary activity, and when they do, we are transformed. I think of these as Sabbath moments, all of them, and they are essential to our wholeness and well-being. Indeed, we are so dependent on these times of refreshment and renewal and rest that this summer's worship is devoted to discovering Sabbath again ... not just on Sunday mornings, but in the very midst of our daily rounds.

Church isn't the only liminal place, nor Sunday morning the only Sabbath time. And yet ... and yet even the ancients knew that *without* these special times and places, we would quickly forget that *anything* is sacred. We need our time in church to realign ourselves, to remember how the world was intended to be, to reclaim what is true in the midst of the falsehoods of the world. Michael Sadgrove, Dean of the Cathedral in Durham, England, said it this way:

“[In the Scripture], the *temple* is God's sanctuary, the sacred place that symbolizes presence, kingship, covenant promise. But we need to imagine how [the first readers] would have understood this. In the ancient world, holy places such as temples and shrines were symbols of the world itself, a microcosm of the universe in its perfection and good order. ... Worshippers crossed the threshold of this sacred space and entered a transcendent world that spoke of the universe as the sphere of God's presence and God's reign.” (The Very Rev. Michael Sadgrove, Durham Cathedral, Durham, United Kingdom, December 7, 2006, found on www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/schedule/sermons/109).

Worshippers cross the threshold for this very reason still. To remember that the world as we know it is not the perfect order ... to see a glimpse of life as God intended it ... to know the truth about ourselves, the truth that sets us free.

The Lord knows we need that reality check. We are so inundated with false images about ourselves and the world, it is easy to start to believe them. When Jesus called himself the shepherd's gate that protected us from the thieves and bandits who would kill and destroy us, surely he would have included our modern nemeses. The falsehood that we are ourselves the center of the universe, that we are self-made and independent, and have no one to credit but ourselves. The falsehood that we are our numbers – our SATs; GPAs; our production numbers; salary & benefits; our net worth. The falsehood that we are important by virtue of the places we belong: the college we attend; the firm we land in; the club we're invited to join; the street address we attain. The falsehood that happiness is found in the things and experiences we buy: the newest iPod; the latest game; the most exotic vacation; the \$1000 purse. Don't get me wrong – numbers are necessary measurements, and aspiration is a healthy desire, and things we buy can be fun. But only when we come into the presence of God, only when we pass through the gate of our Good Shepherd, only when we cross the threshold from the outer world to the house of God do we put it all in perspective. It is *God* who made us, and not we ourselves, the psalmist tells us; we are *God's* people, and the beloved flock of God's own hand. And it is here we find rest for our souls.

Sometimes it is easy to forget how precious this gift is, this place of beauty and of rest ... it is easy to forget how blessed we are to be stretched by the time we spend here ... how refreshing it is to be transported into a liminal place, a place of new visions, a place of such peace. And it is easy to forget how many people have not crossed the threshold yet, into this church or any other temple of the Lord. So let me close with an invitation, especially to those who cross the threshold of this house of worship so often that you've made God's house your home. I was so touched by the words of one Celtic writer:

“As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place, near enough to God to hear Him, and know He is there, but not so far from others as not to hear them, and remember they are there, too. Where? Outside the door – thousands of them, millions of them. But – more important for me – one of them, two of them, ten of them, whose hands I am intended to put on the latch. So I shall stand by the door and wait for those who seek it. ... So I stand by the door.” (Samuel Moor Shoemaker, *Celtic Daily Prayer from the Northumbria Community* (Northumbria Community Trust, HarperSanFrancisco, p. 628).

Beloved in Christ, we have been welcomed here this day to cross over the threshold to come into God's presence with singing, to come into his courts with praise, and as welcomed as we have been, let us welcome others too. Let us welcome everyone who might come to Him to cross the threshold to find the grace and rest that they need. Amen.