

Let us pray:

And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our God and our King.
Amen.

I Kings 8:1,6,10-11,22-30,41-43
Psalm 84:1-2, 10-12
Ephesians 6:10-20

LIFE AS A DOORKEEPER

We read from Psalm 84 this morning the words, “I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.” But what does it mean exactly to be a doorkeeper? My mind immediately pictures the entrance to a club, with a burly guard stationed outside, who checks everyone’s ID, allowing the privileged few inside while turning away the eager riffraff.

I am an inveterate reader; and one of the books I finished recently is “The Widows of Malabar Hill” by Sujata Massey. The story takes place in India in the early 1920s, with some flashbacks to a few years previously. The protagonist, Perveen Mistry, is a solicitor working with her father; she happens to be the first female lawyer in Bombay. And, because she is a woman, her father asks her to be in touch with the three (yes, three) widows of one of his clients who recently died. The widows are living in Purdah, which means they are in a blocked-off side of their house, where no man is allowed to enter.

When Perveen first goes to their house, she is stopped by a gate and has to argue with the watchman to gain entrance. He tells her, “(They) are in mourning, not seeing anyone.” She replies that the widows have requested a consultation. And the author continues,

“Looking regretful, the watchman opened the gate and kept his head down, as if not wishing to see her go through.”

Both the bouncer at the nightclub and the watchman at the widows’ home are acting as doorkeepers. Their primary job is to keep people out. But is that the dream of the psalmist? To stand at the door of the Temple and keep the unworthy out? The scripture lesson from the letter to the Ephesians certainly seems to support that idea.

It instructs the reader, “¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our^a struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.” Certainly sounds like our job is to stand firm and disperse everyone who doesn’t belong there.

But wait a minute, what did we read at the end of the Old Testament lesson from the First Book of Kings? “41 ‘Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, ⁴³then hear in 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.’”

That sounds very different; doesn't it? The unknown author quotes King Solomon, who built the first Temple in Jerusalem, as imploring God to hear the cries of foreigners and grant their pleas, "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."

"All the peoples of the earth" are to know God's name, and fear him, which in today's parlance, really means to worship, adore, and obey God. Doesn't sound like anyone is to be kept out; does it?

In contrast, our society today has become a battleground between insiders and outsiders. Whether it is a political question of which immigrants should be allowed inside our borders; or a pseudo-religious question of what kind of people should be allowed in the church; or even a legal question of who should feel safe and free, and who should live in constant fear, many people in our country have decided that their role in life is to keep out the unwanted, the so-called riffraff of society. And many of them cloak themselves in the seeming "armor of God" to do so.

So let's look a little more closely at that passage from Ephesians. The Access Bible says, in its introduction to the letter, "Ephesians appears to address Christians as they live in the interim between two great cosmic battles: one already performed by God when all things were placed under Jesus' feet, and another to be held on that 'evil day' when the church in its fullness as Christ's body will fight in heavenly places. In between these battles, the universal church has been created for good works, and it accepts the unity of the body of Christ and grows toward full maturity. **To accept that unity, the universal church must recognize the great pre-ordained mystery, that is the bringing together in Christ of ALL social relations (between different ethnic groups and among those in households) in the exalted body of Christ.**"

And the commentator goes on to say, “The goal of the full maturity of the exalted church, moreover, is to **attack the cosmic powers** which still have an effect on the disobedient (or the unbelievers), that is, on those who are not a part of the household of God.”

So, with all that in mind, let’s look again at the relevant part of the passage we read earlier: “¹¹Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our^a struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

It seems that our job as doorkeepers in the house of the Lord is not to keep out flesh and blood creatures, whether or not they look like, act like, or believe like we do; but, rather, our job is to battle against the “cosmic powers” and the “spiritual forces of evil”, even if those powers and forces are supported by our rulers and authorities.

What are these cosmic powers and spiritual forces of evil? Well, I feel sure they include racism, fascism, homophobia, and all other attitudes that promote hatred and suppression of other people. Those are the things we are to battle against, in our politics, in our churches, and in our daily lives. Or, we could say, our role as true doorkeepers, is to battle against all those who would devote their lives to keeping out those whom they portray as riffraff. To stand firm in our belief that God loves and welcomes **all** people, and so should we.

This is obviously a controversial attitude to adopt, and one that may bring us into conflict with those we know and love who have adopted the attitude that God somehow loves them and their kind, but hates all those who are different. It sometimes may seem easier to just go along with those leading the crusade to exclude others, rather than stand our ground and insist on including all of God’s children.

You may be aware that the lectionary, or schedule of scriptures to be used each Sunday, includes not only a reading from the Old Testament plus a Psalm and a reading from the Epistles (or letters); but it also includes a Gospel reading. I chose this morning not to read or preach from the Gospel lesson (which was from the gospel according to John).

But I do want to share a brief portion of it, John 6:66-68: "Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? **You have the words of eternal life.**'"

And so I ask you this morning the same question: If you choose to turn away from Christ's teaching, to ignore our God-given responsibility, to whom shall you go? For it is a given that Jesus Christ alone has the words of eternal life. And He is calling you to be a doorkeeper in his Temple, to keep out the pernicious doctrines of hate and evil, and to keep the door open for **all** the peoples of God.

And now to the Ruler of all worlds,
Undying, invisible, the only God,
Be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.