

Lent 3  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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## **Knocking at the Door**

I must say after last week's sermon that these sermons are really not for you. Archbishop Bloom has a way of striking right to the heart of the matter. If you thought I was preaching to you, well, sorry to tell you this, but you're wrong. These sermons are directed at me, and you're welcome to listen in if you like!

Chapter 2 has to do with knocking at the door. When I was at school in January I went to Church at the National Cathedral in Washington DC. I had long wanted to go there, and this was my chance. As I walked into the magnificent building, I was struck by several things. First, it is a soaring, Gothic cathedral that is truly magnificent, and second, it was "my church." It is an Episcopal church, and I am an Episcopalian, so I belonged here.

Bishop Bloom says that one knocks at the door when one is outside, not inside. Like an Episcopalian who stands before the great Cathedral, as long as they stand outside they do not fully grasp the magnificence of the building, its chapels, statuary and symbolism. The outsider may go home and gloat to friends. "I've been to the National Cathedral, and it's a magnificent place. I know all about it." But when asked what was inside they would not be able to say with any reliability, for they never really entered. To truly appreciate this building the Episcopalian needs to climb the steps and walk through the door. It helps then of the person raises his or her head back and looks up and around. Then they begin to get an appreciation for the building as a piece of spiritual art. Then their hearts will be lifted upward to God, and they will be blessed.

In the same way the Christian knows he or she "belongs," in the sense that we belong to the Kingdom. We have been baptized; we know that God's grace for salvation has come to us. But to plumb the depths of it, to appreciate the heights, to get a glimpse of the incredible, impossible, unconditional love of the heart of God one must knock. If one knocks one acknowledges that one belongs, but is not inside. As long as we pretend that we are inside we tell ourselves a lie, and we talk like the Episcopalian who has not entered the Cathedral. But if one knocks one says to God, "I will not be satisfied with being an outsider. I want to go inside. I want to plumb the depths and marvel at the heights. I want to be in deep, personal communion with you."

It is easy to ascend the steps of the National Cathedral, but it is not easy to knock at the door. Two things are necessary.

First, only a free heart can knock. I get two related questions about Sir Rodly, my hawk all the time. One is, "How can you keep such a magnificent animal in captivity?" The answer is that I don't. Every time I take him out I release him. He is entirely free to leave me for good every time. It is a very real choice, too—I have had them choose not to come back. The other is, "Does he always come back to you?" The answer is, "So far!" Sir Rodly is a wild bird with whom I have built a relationship of trust. The moment I grasp hold of him he will leave. I possess this hawk but I do not own him. We have a free relationship.

Knocking is an act of love. What I grasp in my hand is, Bloom says, removed from the realm of love. Only an empty heart is free to love. If we are to love God then we must release everything else.

It helps to realize that, like the hawk, we never really had them in the first place. We may have houses and land, but an economic crash could suddenly take them from us. We may have health, but an unexpected accident could ruin it. The circumstances of your life are not of your making. Why were you not born as a leper in the streets of Calcutta? You could have been but you were not. We don't even have our lives, for we did not choose to be born, and death could come suddenly and unavoidably. When our hands are empty we receive the gifts of God as expressions of God's love. Only an empty hand can receive a gift, only an empty heart can receive God. Someone has said, "All the food in the world is the love of God made edible."

Second, we must find the door. When I entered the National Cathedral I could appreciate it because of something I experienced as a boy. I and my friends would often go downtown Quito to the big historic 17th century stone churches. Going into them was always a mixed feeling. On the one hand, the sudden quiet from the hubbub of noise outside was startling and soothing. It lent to a spirit of prayer and contemplation. The worshippers there also gave it a holy tone, one not lost to my young heart, and one I often hungered for. But on the other hand, these were Catholic churches and I was a Protestant, and this in a land and a time when Catholics and Protestants didn't always get along very well, in fact, they didn't get along at all most of the time. I always felt like an unannounced guest, liable to be thrown out the moment I became conspicuous. Now I do not think now that I would have been thrown out, but I still carried within me a sense of connection joined somehow with a sense of distance.

When I got to the National Cathedral the same sudden holy quiet descends just as powerfully. Worshippers are gathered around the chapels and shrines in prayer. A priest's voice may drone in the great and distant high altar. But this was my church. I felt no sense of distance. I was not a guest; I was a son of the house.

In a similar sort of way, the door may be hidden from view, but it is familiar to us. Jesus said, in Luke 17:20-21, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." St. John Chrysostom said, "Find the door to your heart and it will be the door to the Kingdom of Heaven."

The door that must be opened is the door of your heart. This is not an inwardness, a morbid contemplation of one's navel for the sake of subjective self-knowledge, it is a journey into the depths of you and through them into the heart of God. If the Spirit of a person is the deepest part of them, and that spirit is inspired and enlivened by the very Spirit of God, then the doorway into the heart of God is through your own deepest self.

Familiar it may be, but hard to find, nonetheless. St. Gregory of Naziansus said, "As soon as we direct our prayer to an image of God we have in our imaginations, or an icon or statue or anything we place a barrier between our selves and God." What he means is that as soon as we begin to think that our ideas about God are God then we have turned our gaze from God toward those ideas. We have created an idol. How many idols do we have that stand between God and our hearts?

Some aspect of our religious expression as Christians become idols:

- The Bible
- The Church Building
- The people in the Church
- Our understanding of God, of biblical teaching, or of doctrine
- A particular minister or priest
- An earthly good, noble as it might be

Other things can, too:

- A family member, or one's family all together,
- A lover or loved one
- Or a great cause,
- A nation
- Our particular understanding of "the good life,"
- A particular aspect of our living, our environment or our world that needs setting right,

Or an ideal like

- Liberty
- Cleanliness

- Or even truth

Every one of them is good, but not one of them is ultimate in significance. Every one of them can become an idol. The door to the Kingdom is always behind the idols we cling to. As with everything else, we must set them aside if we are to find the door.

What, then, will be our prayer? Bloom tells a legend of Moses. Moses spends a day with a shepherd and at the end of the day helps the shepherd milk the ewes. The shepherd then takes the best of the milk and puts it in a wooden bowl on a flat rock some distance away. Moses asks about the milk.

”Oh, that's God's milk,” says the shepherd.

“Does God drink the milk?” asks Moses.

“Yes, in the morning it is all gone.”

Then Moses, being much more sophisticated and educated, explains that since God is spirit God cannot drink the milk. If the shepherd will wait behind a bush in the dark the truth will be known. So the shepherd waits, and in the moonlight a little fox comes out, laps up all the milk, and disappears into the desert night.

In the morning the shepherd is downcast.

“What's the matter,” asks Moses.

“You were right,” says the shepherd. “A little fox drank the milk. God does not want my offering.”

“But now you know more about God than you did before,” replies Moses enthusiastically.

“Yes,” says the shepherd, “but the only way I had to show my love for God has now been taken away.”

This sends Moses into the desert to pray. God appears and says, ”Moses, you were wrong. I always accepted the shepherd's offering of milk. But since I am pure spirit and do not need the milk, I shared it with this little fox who is very fond of it!”

Like the shepherd, choose prayers worthy of you, that express your own inner delight in

God, words of which you are not ashamed before God. Either borrow words that fit, or make up your own. Then offer them to God with the fervor of a lover giving a gift of flowers to the beloved. Earnestly, from the heart, turn your words Godward.

And then a funny thing happens. Though God is beyond all images, yet the awareness of the presence of God will begin to grow into you, so that soon all of your waking walking, talking and living will be done in the divine presence. As the Apostle admonishes us, you will pray without ceasing.

As you listen or read the chapters for each day in our parish Lenten discipline, or as you turn down the chocolate, beer or television, whatever it is you are doing for Lent, offer it from the heart as a heartfelt and sincere desire to express your love of God. You may not know the presence of God immediately—after all, this is a relationship between two completely free parties—but sooner or later God will show up with all that that entails.

You will have knocked, and the door will have been opened to you.