



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Door and the Path

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ SEPTEMBER 19, 2021

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:6-8 (ESV)

Day One

I remember clearly a unique day. I had a new college degree, a license from the state to teach, and a signed contract. On that first day of my first year as a teacher, I stood in front of 100 teenagers, many of whom were more sophisticated and had more life experience than I. It was terrifying. At the end of that day, I was exhausted. I thought someone should pin a medal on me. And then I remembered that I had to get up the next morning and do it all over again. That had just been Day One. Yes, I was 100% a teacher. I had the license, the job, and classrooms full of students. But a long path stretched ahead.

I remember another day. I walked down the center aisle of the church on my father's arm. There stood a handsome groom waiting for me. We pledged our vows, signed the license and at that moment we were 100% married. But that was just Day One. There was a long path ahead of us. We have walked together 41 years and still the path lies before us.

I remember another day, in a hospital room. A nurse placed a newborn baby in my arms and said brightly, "You can go home now. Your husband is getting the car." I had a moment of near-panic. "That's it?" I thought. "You're just going to hand a newborn to me? I have no idea

what to do." At home, we lay the baby in a bassinet next to our bed and then we both lay side by side, rigid with anxiety. At two in the morning, I heard Al's voice: "How long can a human being go without sleep?" It was only Day One, and there was a long path yet to walk.

The Door

First there is the door. The door for becoming a teacher is a degree, a license, and then a contract. The door for marriage is a romance, a proposal, then a wedding. The door for parenting is receiving a child into your home no matter how that child arrives there.

Discipleship, too, begins with a door. Jesus said, "I am the door." As children we may be taught to pray, "God is great; God is good." We may learn the verse, "God is love." We may sing "Jesus Loves Me," but over time, we feel the distance and we know there is a separation from God.

The separation is quite real. There is a gulf between each of us and a holy God. The perfect holiness of God truly does make it impossible for us to approach on our own merits. The great holiness of God is a central fact of reality, yet hard for our generation to grasp at all. The writer John Updike said that "our brains are no longer conditioned for reverence and awe." So we believers gather that we might remind each other and affirm together the reality and holiness of God in our worship. We need a way in; we need a door.

God provided a door; Jesus is that door, and that's the offer of salvation. It meets our need to be right with God, right before God. We can never get to the bottom of the greatness of the good news of the gospel, what God has done for us in Jesus. To go through the door is to understand how deep is your need and how complete is God's work to claim you and make you His own. You choose, you accept, and you belong to the Lord. You are not your own. You are bought with a price, says the Bible. Whether you make a small, quiet decision or a dramatic one, everyone can be sure.

No one need be in doubt. I love the verse that says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Three times those words are said in the Bible, in Joel 2:32, Acts 2:21, and Romans 10:13. Who can be saved? Everyone who calls out to God.

Jesus affirms this. He said, “I came for the sick, not the healthy, for sinners not the upright.” That’s in Mark chapter 2. Jesus quoted the words Isaiah had written about him centuries earlier: “A bruised reed I will not break; a smoldering wick I will not extinguish” (Isaiah 42:3). The Bible tells us that even before the world was made, the Door was purposed, planned and promised. Promise made; promise kept.

As believers, we step through the door of faith and then we walk the path. How did I become a teacher? Student by student, class by class. How did I learn to parent? Day by day, through vaccinations and vacations, crises and Christmases, through mealtimes, bath times, and bed-times. How did I learn to be a wife? By a thousand small delights and also difficulties and discouragements. How do we follow Jesus and become like Him? Day by day, blessing by blessing, repentance after repentance, through a life-long, winding path.

*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him...
Colossians 2:6*

The Path

You are not alone on the journey. You are not meant to walk alone. You are part of a great company, past and present, those who have bowed the knee to the Lord Almighty, who have desired to follow Jesus. There are fellow travelers here in this congregation, in the churches around us and around the globe. You are joining a vast company who have gone before and many yet to come. Even this morning, millions of others across the globe have done this—they have gathered to worship. Every hour of every day, somewhere on this globe, the praises and prayers of God’s people are rising. You are part of a great company.

We need each other. I begin to limp and need your steadying arm. I learned this afresh when a hard diagnosis came to our home. You stumble and need my reassurance. I am too tired to look ahead and need your fresh eyes to tell me a place to rest is up ahead. As you walk the path, stay teachable, willing to learn. Be humble to ask, to acknowledge that where you are now is not who you hope to be.

You are not alone on the journey because you are participating in the very great things God is doing. Yes, you, in your ordinary life. Books about World War II are still being written, lots of them. Right after the

war, the great histories of the war were written, about battles, and generals, and strategies. That's the great story. But even now many new stories are being told, stories of forgotten heroes, individuals who helped in the French Resistance or privately and at great risk shielded vulnerable people from being transported to the camps. Their names were never in the headlines, and even today their faces, names, and lives are quietly uncovered. But oh, the stories. Heroes who followed their conscience at risk, people who sought not their own safety but the protection of others. They are the heroes and there were hundreds of them, a quiet army of conscientious people, so many of them followers of Jesus. They were people on the path.

You do not know, and will not know, the significance of your own life, your own prayers, your own small obediences. Every response you have made to the leading of God in your life matters. You are not alone on the path. You are part of something very great, very good, truly significant in eternal ways.

Some of the stories of these unknown World War II heroes were so hidden that even their children didn't know. Only after the person has died, in letters or diaries—their own or sometimes other people's—do the stories come to light. One of the joys of heaven will be discovering what small and forgotten actions of ours really mattered, where we were unwittingly, by our commitment to follow Jesus, part of something very grand, even glorious.

The path is a life-long journey. Always, there is a next step, a new awareness, a fresh learning, a surprise gift, a hardship you never saw coming. Really, I'm still learning to be a teacher. I'm still learning to be a mother in the stage of life I'm in now with my kids grown and gone. A very wise woman once said, "Motherhood is a lifetime sentence, no pardon, no parole." That wise woman was my mother. She said that after raising me. Oh, and then there is marriage. On our wedding day, we make audacious commitments of selflessness, of love and loyalty. The promises we make are utterly beyond any of us. Who, on their wedding day, possesses the quality of character to live up to the promises made?

My husband Al has done marriage counseling for 40 years. And he has said these words to many couples: "When you married, God gave you a

gift. The gift is this—that you will spend the rest of your life learning how to love this one person. It will take you all your life and it will change you. That’s the gift.” It is a gift of forever knocking up against our own deficits of love and mercy and kindness and patience. A gift of realizing again our need for more humor and wisdom and strength and staying power. A gift, too, of finding that we do have more love to give, more ability to support, more courage than we knew.

The path is intentional. It asks for an investment of our intellect, emotions, and will. Our intellect as we think and learn, our emotions as we are honest about our deep vulnerability and our need for inner healing and about our own dark side, our will as we each day take up the challenge of obedience, of following after.

But some of it is not intentional. Some of the path you will not choose. Life will bring it to you. God is there too. My friend Madelyn retired from teaching when she was in her fifties and she had an intentional plan for growing in her faith. She would study more and serve more. She could see the path ahead of her, a path of growth, full of light. Just a week after retirement came the call from the doctor’s office—the lump was malignant. Suddenly she was on a path she did not choose. She would tell you that though this part of the path was frightening and difficult, it had gifts and growth found nowhere else. God was with her, and this too was the path of discipleship.

The path is not straight. It is not a Kansas highway. It is a crooked, twisting road with surprises around the next turn. Walking the path includes more than coming to church or reading the Bible. It includes your suffering, repentance, trouble, sacrifice, self-denial. It includes your most private failures and your most wonderful accomplishments and successes. The Bible tells us that. It includes heart expanding love and grace and mercy and hope and answers to prayer that astound. It includes deep joy and true peace.

The Bible: Guidebook for the Path

The Bible will show you over many years who God is. In the Bible, you will always be getting to know God. Always. You will find you have underestimated his grace and mercy and kindness and his holiness, his very right condemnation of all the evil that destroys what is

good. You do not yet truly know the greatness of God, the holiness of God, or the goodness of God—the heights of his glory and the depths of his mercy. Even now, there are great and strengthening surprises ahead for you as you learn more of the character of your Creator.

The Bible will show you who you are. I remember the very moment as a 10-year-old when I saw the words in Jeremiah: “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” Those words pierced me. I remember the day in my forties when I read Isaiah 64:2: “I will give her a new name and her name will be She is my Delight.” Those words pierced me, and I knew that God speaks in the Bible. As you walk the path you will learn that God calls you to rest in the love and comfort and promise He offers. Lay down what is too heavy to carry, Jesus said. This is how you learn to trust. On the path of discipleship you will see that your own needs are greater than you know, that your own gifts are larger than you think. You will discover deep inside the places in you that need the healing and touch of God for old sorrows, for old harms done to you, for old injustices. God has drops of mercy and healing for those. You will find the courage to tell the truth about some things you have never really faced, never fully acknowledged and you will find a courage to tell the truth because you are held secure, and dearly loved, and promised such kindness. “He knows our weaknesses; he knows we are but dust,” says Psalm 103.

The Bible will challenge you. The Bible will raise questions. A deep understanding of scripture develops over years. Consider this: If tomorrow, a leading news story was the discovery of a scroll, thousands of years old, imagine the careful, respectful study it would be given. Who would expect it to reflect 21st century ways of thinking? Bring your intellectual curiosity to your reading. Bring also respect and humility. Hold your questions honestly and bravely. Never pretend to have an explanation when you don’t. Mystery, wonder, and awe—these responses are not stirred by commonplace, everyday ideas. Let the Bible be an encounter with the Divine. Yes, the Bible will challenge you intellectually. Hold the questions and tension and keep walking on the path.

The Bible will also challenge you personally and morally. It contains many a “yes” and many a “no.” Which is harder to hear? Remember that a “no” in one direction is a “yes” in another direction. When the

Bible says “no” to clinging to a treasured resentment story that you have rehearsed until it is word perfect, it is inviting you to say “yes” to forgiveness, which brings ease and peace and freedom. Every “yes” you say in obedience is a “no” to something unworthy and unhealthy.

The Bible will challenge the culture. “Don’t conform to the culture around you,” wrote Paul in Romans 12:2. J. B. Phillips reworded it like this: “Don’t let the world press you into its mold.” That’s been true for every Christian in every culture, every age, every century. The Christian faith will challenge the cultural messages and the prevailing, ever-changing ethics of the day. We stand under the word of God that it might help us, teach us, correct us, not that we may judge it and only accept that which fits in with what I already know. Our scripture today says: “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition... and not according to Christ.”

In our own shared cultural moment, when societal values are in upheaval, we must take stock. Cultural voices do influence us. What trending ideas will we accept? What must be refused? *You are more than a product of our cultural time. You are more than a product of your generation.* The Bible reminds us: “Know that the LORD is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.” Psalm 100:3

The Bible has authority. Through its varied 66 books, written over 1,600 years, there emerges remarkable consistency, an imparting to our understanding of the authority, kindness, majesty, freedom, glory, justice, eternity, and profound love of God the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. You underestimate God’s kindness. You have only a very dim view of God’s glory and greatness. Rather than saying that God is beyond understanding, invite the Bible to open up to you more of His character and His great ways. He has done great things for you, and He is for you! You learn in scripture that you are the created, chosen, called, gifted, guided, beloved son or daughter of God. As the truth of that settles, it will ground you and bring you joy. Again I say, I do not stand over the Bible that I might judge it. I stand under the authority of the Bible that it might teach me, help me, correct me, and lift my eyes to see the Lord.

The Bible shows us the way home. What lies ahead? Our final rescue and our delight to be home with God in Heaven. The Bible ends with a wedding dinner—Jesus and His bride, the Church, together at last. The Bible is not a riddle to puzzle us; it's a romance to woo us and claim us.

As you walk the path, tell the Lord what you know. Think on what God has done for you, how He has protected and provided, how He has forgiven and blessed you. That is how we praise God. Turn to a psalm or open a hymnbook and read it out loud as you walk around your house or sit in your favorite chair. Tell the Lord your troubles, tell the Lord what you see, and feel, and long for. This is how we find rest and peace.

Do you have any doubt about the door? Perhaps you have only known God as a resource, someone to call on as a last resort, to fix circumstances that are beyond you. Is God only an advisor? A consultant? Friends, there is more for you than this. I need God not to change situations and circumstances, but to change me. I need more than advice; I need a Savior. When that moment comes, that humble moment when you see the door, step through it, declare your need for the Lord, your loyalty to the Lord, and let the Lord welcome you. You will learn that you are declared holy, free from all condemnation, adopted, received, and right with God. Then walk the path, day by day, decade by decade, through happy days and calamitous ones, through repentance and mercy and guidance and blessing until the last day when you are finally home.

You are made in the image of God. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote:

If we let him... he will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine.... The process will be long... but that is what we are in for. Nothing less.

Do you believe this? This is the gospel. This is the Good News. This is the point of your life. Remember what we read today: **Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.** (Colossians 2:6) ■

