### “The Gate of the Lord” Steve Finlan for The First Church, March 24, 2024

**Psalm 118:19–23**

19Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. 20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

**Mark 11:1–10, 15–17**

1When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2and said to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. 3If anyone says to you, ‘Why are you doing this?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.’” 4They went away and found a colt tied near a door . . . 6They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. 7Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. 8Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. 9Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” . . . 15He entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves; 16and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. 17He was teaching and saying, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.”

Good morning and welcome, everyone, to First Church. It may be cold outside, but inside we are warmed by all the kind hearts. When we gather together, we sometimes share updates about ourselves, or experiences we’ve had during the week. For this sermon, I’m going to share some theological reflection with you, and ask you a question or two.

Today’s reading from Psalms refers to a gate. A gate can be a symbol for entrance into a new condition, a new stage of life, or a different dimension in one’s life. For us, it is more often a *door* that we encounter, rather than a gate. Think about doors that you have entered when you have started a new job, gone to a new school, moved into a new house. Gates and doors can signify transitions and beginnings. Also, gates in ancient city walls were grand structures not only for defense, but built to impress.

With that in mind, let’s look at the gate spoken of in the psalm. It is not entirely clear what gate is being referred to. It could be one of the gates into the city or a gate into the Temple compound. Some kind of building is being envisioned, as seen in the remarkable statement that the stone that the builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.

This saying becomes meaningful when Jesus applies it to himself, implying that he has become the cornerstone of a *new* building, that is, a new spiritual fellowship. Here we have the house of the Lord mentioned in v. 26 and a festal procession up to the altar in v. 27. So it is probably a gate into the Temple area that is being referenced. Of course, that means an entrance into a holy area. Inwardly, it could signify taking on a worshipful attitude, with joy and expectation for spiritual growth.

Jesus’ own religious loyalty was not centered in the Temple, as was the loyalty of many of his countrymen. But he did respect the Temple and believed in what it was supposed to symbolize, at least according to the Isaiah passage (56:7) that he quoted, the memorable phrase that it was to be a “house of prayer for *all* the nations” (Mark 11:17). As you may remember, Jesus said this as a contrast to the business-like setting that had taken over the Temple area.

The inclusive ideals of Jesus stood in contrast to the beliefs of the Sadducees, for whom the Temple was most definitely not for Gentiles, who were forbidden from entering its inner courts. The Sadducees had laws: the inner court was for priests only, the next court was for Jewish men, then a court for Jewish women, and finally a court for the Gentiles, with walls between each court.

The way of the Sadducees was a way of walls and closed gates. Now, imagine how different the Jewish religion would have been if it had opened the doors, and openly welcomed women and Gentiles into the inner courts! And how differently the priestly leadership might have become if they had received Jesus? How different it would have been if they had been broad-minded and interested in new spiritual frontiers.

Instead, they were attached to a crystallized and frozen version of their national religion. They ignored voices such as Isaiah’s and Jesus’ that invited Gentile participation. The psalm speaks of the righteous entering through the gate. What if the religious authorities had believed that some of the righteous could be foreigners? How different would their religion have been! And how differently the story might have turned out.

Last week we read about a group of Greeks that asked to see Jesus. Elsewhere we’ve read of a Roman centurion asking for healing for his servant (Matt 8:5–10), and a Canaanite woman asking for healing for her daughter (Matt 15:21–28). What if these people could be considered righteous, and treated as equals, as Jesus treated them? He changed these people’s lives by including them, especially the Canaanite woman. Imagine her telling the story years later! And imagine her daughter’s take on things. Her very life was a result of his healing intervention. And now, try to imagine a temple where Gentiles and Jews alike gathered to hear Jesus’ sermons. And the stimulating conversation afterwards! What would *their* coffee hour have been like?

This didn’t happen, but there were stimulating interactions and loving encounters in the early churches. Paul had to work hard to get Jews and Gentiles to respect each other and treat each other as equals, and he had some success in this effort. Unfortunately, the problem of exclusion continues today. Do we allow so-called foreigners to be treated as equals in the kingdom, as having equal access to God’s love? Would we extend the hand of friendship to Palestinian Christians, if we knew any? There are several Palestinian Christian churches in America, one in Pennsylvania.

Can we be both loving and wise when we open our heart-gates and extend the hand of friendship? Can we as individual Christians practice love and peacemaking, with generosity but also with wisdom, wherever and whenever we can? Can we avoid the pitfalls and quagmires of a politically charged situation? Can we avoid bitter political arguments? The challenge is before us and we need to be discerning and wise as serpents.

The church itself needs to stay out of politics. Our business as a church is to proclaim the kingdom of God as Jesus proclaimed it, and receive with hospitality all who want to learn about Jesus’ words. We need to be an open gate. But our business as individual citizens may involve us with the issues of war, peace, and human rights in the world today.

One guideline I would suggest is to be suspicious of any argument that is completely one-sided, politically. Both sides in the Israeli-Palestinian con­flict bear some responsibility, and need to make some concessions. A real peacemaker cannot take a divisive and partisan position. I repeat Jesus’ words: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt 5:9). Children of God should be open and inviting to other children of God, looking for mutual respect.

Our loyalty to God needs to be deep and enduring, not shallow and fleeting. The crowd that welcomed Jesus on Palm Sunday seems not to have had a very deep loyalty. They were excited at the moment, but their support was not long-lasting. Where were they when Jesus was being accused by the Sanhedrin and tried before Pilate? Jesus was not looking for a celebratory welcome, but for a deeper understanding and affirmation of the values of love and inclusiveness. The gate that he wanted people to enter was a gate into Jewish and Gentile alliance in loyalty to God and commitment to love and fairness.

So here’s my question: Can we be open to all nationalities? Can we accept people from all nations and ethnic groups? Is our house of worship a house of prayer for all nations? I say: let us extend the same welcome to all nationalities that Jesus extended, and recognize faith in others, the way Jesus recognized faith in a Roman soldier and in a Gentile mother. He recognized their sincerity, and drew attention to it. He said, of the Roman, “not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9). Are we ready to encounter the great faith of some foreigners whom we haven’t met yet?

Jesus was continually throwing salvation open to outsiders, as when he told his fellow Nazarenes that “there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah . . . yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon,” and he continues that no leper was cleansed in the time of Elisha except Naaman the Syrian (Luke 4:25–27). He reminds them of stories of pious Gentiles who were healed in the Jewish Scriptures.

Who is the Sidonian or the Syrian today? Are we ready to recognize their faith and worthiness? Be like the Good Samaritan, doing good without expectation of reward. Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. Be a peacemaker, a child of God. You have it in you.