

I set aside Thursday mornings to write my message for Sunday. This past Thursday questions and concerns about the Corona Virus took over my whole morning. People wanted to know what we were doing, what precautions we were taking, what events were still on and which events were going to be cancelled.

We live by faith and put our trust in God. But we also listen to the concerns and needs that are out there and try to address them. As you can see, we are taking precautions. We want to make it possible for us to worship the Lord together while limit the potential transmission of any illness.

You probably ran into questions about what was open and what was not this past week. If you tried to visit someone in a nursing home or medical facility you may not have been allowed in. If you planned to go to the Big Ten Basketball tournament you had to cancel your plans. If you are in college, your classes have all been moved online until after Easter if not later. Most Washtenaw County public schools have closed through their spring break if not longer.

What doors are open and what doors are closed are the questions that we find in the next stage of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem. His journey began in Caesarea Philippi with the question "Are you with me or against me?" Will we let Jesus be the Promised Savior according to God's plan or according to our personal desires? The next stop was the Mountain top for the transfiguration with the question, "Are you talking or listening?" Are we ready to listen to God voice or are we still trying to tell Him what we want Him to do?

Today we come to Capernaum, the center for Jesus' public ministry in Galilee. Today's question is "Open or Closed?" Who finds the door to God's kingdom open and who finds the door closed to them? The Gospel of Luke gives us the setting for the story Jesus told about the lost sheep. Luke reports, "Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!" (Luke 15:1-2)

Obviously the Religious Elite wanted to close the door to those they considered unworthy. These were people the religious elite considered lost, those in their minds who had strayed too far away from God. These were the people Jesus came to find, the ones He wanted to open the door for and welcome back into God's family. Jesus' ministry was all about breaking down the barriers that kept people away from God and shutting them out of God's family. Jesus said that He came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

Jesus told them, "If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost?" (Matthew 18:12) The shepherd with the 100 sheep goes after one that is lost. And when he finds the lost sheep there is joy! There is a celebration. Jesus wants to open the door to God's family to

anyone and everyone who has ever strayed away. He doesn't want anyone to be lost or die without Him. He wants us to celebrate their return with Him.

Jesus told the story about sheep. But then He made it personal when He said, **“If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back.”** (Matthew 18:15) It is one thing to talk about animals. It is not so easy to talk about people who have hurt or offended us. It is far too easy to just let things go, to let the problem drive a wedge between you and the other person, to shut them out.

It happens way too often. Families get divided because one family member offended another and they aren't willing to try to work things out. No one wants to admit their fault or ask for forgiveness. It happens in church families when one person gets hurt by another and either leaves the church or talks about the other person behind their back. How do we get things right side up when the relationship is upside down? Jesus tells us that we have to go to them privately and try to resolve the problem.

Jesus is teaching us about the danger of sin and the beauty of God's amazing grace. God shows us our sin in the hope that we see and recognize them. Do you ever wonder why we can have a guilty conscience or are weighed down with shame? Could God be using them to point out our sin, our broken relationship with Him so that we can hear His call to repent and return to Him? What is the first thing you do when you see a highway patrol car ahead of you on the side of the road? Do you look down to see if you are speeding? God's Law causes us to look inside to see if we have been violating His commands.

God doesn't broadcast our sins to the world. He doesn't post them on an electronic bill board on the side of the road. He doesn't leave a negative review on our Facebook page. God invites us to return to Him and be restored.

God wants us to do the same with others. And He helps us do it. Because God forgives us, we can forgive one another. Because God fills us with His love, we can love our enemies. Because God gives us His Holy Spirit, we can be patient with one another, offering them peace instead of ongoing conflict.

We live in a very divisive time. Politics has become nothing more than “Us vs. Them.” But that is not the way God wants us to live. God wants to open the door to His Kingdom to all people. He wants us to break down the doors that keep people out. It is not us vs. them, but them with us in Jesus Christ. Amen.